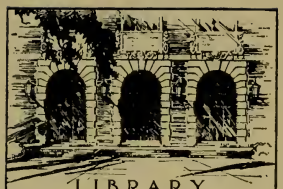

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MY FRIEND JIM

VOL. II.

MY FRIEND JIM

BY

W. E. NORRIS

IN TWO VOLUMES

VOL. II

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MY FRIEND JIM.

CHAPTER I.

For some little time after the evening of the *tableaux* I did not happen to meet the Bracknells, so that I could not judge from personal observation how far Hilda had obeyed her husband's commands and dropped Beauchamp, but divers rumours which reached me pointed to the conclusion that she had not dropped that foolish youth at all; nor indeed had I supposed for one moment that she

intended doing so. It seemed probable enough that she had been able to convince Bracknell of the wisdom of a policy which she had not cared to expound in my presence, and if he had been brought to see that his sister's interests and his own were antagonistic, there could be very little doubt but that he would acquiesce in the sacrifice of his sister's interests with complete philosophy. Jim, who had returned to London, after a flying visit to Elmhurst, amused me by an account of a remonstrance which he had felt it his duty to address to Lady Bracknell, and of the manner in which his intervention had been received.

"Lord Staines doesn't see it," he said confidentially, "but between ourselves, it's as certain as anything can be that

she is doing her best to prevent Beauchamp from proposing to Lady Mildred."

I expressed much surprise, and congratulated Jim upon his insight into the crafty ways of feminine diplomacy; to which he replied modestly that he believed he was about as wide awake as most men nowadays. "One can't mix long in London society without having one's eyes opened," he explained; "and, as you know, I have good cause to distrust Hilda."

He paused, sighed, and then resumed; "I don't want other people to suffer through her as I have suffered. I thought she might perhaps be disposed to admit that she owed me some trifling favour by way of reparation for the past; so I called upon her the other day and

appealed to her to leave Beauchamp alone. It seemed to me that one admirer more or less could make very little difference to her, and I couldn't suppose that she had any deliberate intention of making Lady Mildred unhappy. At least, that's what I said to her."

"Are you so sure," I inquired, "that the loss of Beauchamp will make Lady Mildred unhappy?"

"Oh, yes, I'm afraid so—that is, I believe so," he answered. "From different things that she has said to me, I feel pretty sure that she would accept him if he proposed to her; and after all, why shouldn't she? I don't myself think him particularly attractive, but he is a good natured fellow, and he isn't bad-looking, and—well, I suppose there would be

nothing very extraordinary in any girl's falling in love with him. So, as I tell you, I made my appeal to Hilda; and I wish I hadn't, for it didn't succeed. She began by denying that she had led Beauchamp on, giving me to understand that he was infatuated about her and that she really couldn't help it. Then, when I persisted that she could put a stop to his infatuation very easily if she chose, she got angry and said that I, at any rate, ought not to object if Beauchamp proved faithless. I asked her what she meant—because really I didn't know—whereupon she calmly accused me in so many words of being in love with Lady Mildred myself!"

"How insolent!" I exclaimed. "And how palpably untrue and absurd!"

"Well, yes," Jim agreed, "I think it was rather insolent, and of course it was untrue. I don't know about the absurdity of it; but what does seem to me absurd is that friendship between a man and a woman should be considered impossible. Like a fool as I am, I said so to Lady Bracknell; and she immediately turned round upon me and asked why she wasn't to be allowed to make a friend of Beauchamp. That rather shut me up. All I could say was that I didn't believe she cared two straws about Beauchamp's friendship; whereupon she retorted that she didn't believe in my disinterested friendship for Lady Mildred. So the dispute ended in a draw."

Lookers-on see most of the game, and when one is condemned to be a looker-on

one must endeavour to be satisfied with that somewhat questionable advantage. There is, no doubt, a certain satisfaction and amusement to be derived from understanding your neighbour's state of mind better than he himself understands it, but this is apt to be neutralised by the consciousness of impotence with which lookers-on are commonly afflicted. If I had been a magician, I should have made everybody happy by transferring the bulk of Beauchamp's property to Bracknell for life, with remainder to his son. Being only a poor literary man of prudent instincts, I could do no more than strongly advise Jim to leave London and turn his attention to the management of his home farm. And perhaps it is hardly necessary to add that he

neither took my advice nor thanked me for it.

It was about this time that I received a letter from home, informing me that "good Mr. Turner" was about to pay a visit to the metropolis; and closely following upon the heels of this announcement came good Mr. Turner himself to call upon me, it being very evident that he had been commissioned to inspect and report upon my humble abode by my mother, who has an ineradicable conviction that, when absent from her, I never attempt to make myself comfortable. Mr. Turner, urbane and patronising as of old, dropped in whilst I was sitting over a late breakfast and was kind enough to join me in that repast. He remarked that they had given him nothing but

eggs at his hotel, and eggs he was unable so much as to look, at owing to chronic derangement of the liver.

"I am staying at an hotel," he went on to say. "Dear Hilda thought it best that I should not go to her. She has reasons, you understand—good and sufficient reasons."

I said I was quite sure of that; and indeed the reasons in question did not strike me as being of a recondite character.

But Mr. Turner thought it necessary to give his version of them. "Bracknell," he continued, "is, I am persuaded, both kind-hearted and well-meaning, and would not hurt my feelings for the world; but his habitual companions are—well, not precisely congenial to me; and he has

contracted, from associating with them, a tendency to use words and expressions which, though possibly uttered in what I may almost call an innocent spirit, are such as I might find it my duty as a clergyman to protest against. Dear Hilda thinks—and I quite agree with her—that all risk of unpleasantness should be avoided, and therefore she has kindly secured rooms for me in a very well-conducted hotel. I must remember, however, to tell them that eggs disagree with me."

Now I knew very well that Bracknell might use language fit to make a bargee's hair stand on end before the Reverend Simeon would dare to uplift his voice in rebuke; but I said, with strict adherence to truth, that I had no doubt he would

find himself more comfortable in his present quarters than in Wilton Place; and he presently remarked, sighing a little, that the only thing he regretted was being cut off from the society of his grandson.

"Had I been under the same roof with Sunning," he added, rather pathetically, "we could have amused ourselves together without getting into anybody's way; but I dare say they will let him come and see me when it can be managed."

Poor old Turner's adoration of his grandson was quite upon a level with that of Lord Staines, and the little fellow was fond of him too, although their natures were so unlike. I don't know why with advancing years we should become less tolerant of the infirmities of our elders, but

I am afraid that with most of us it is so. Sunning was so sharp that he can hardly have failed to recognise an old donkey in his maternal grandpapa; but children—perhaps from having been such a short time in the world—love those who love them, and value kindness more than wisdom.

After Mr. Turner had conferred a few words of patronising encouragement upon me (he had a great disdain, tempered by benevolence, for dwellers in Grub Street), and after he had ambled away, with his umbrella under his arm, I began to feel very sorry for him in his loneliness, and it occurred to me that I should be doing an act of true Christian charity by giving him and the other grandfather a day's outing with their common descendant.

And, being in such an amiable mood, I thought I might combine this good deed with the bestowal of a certain amount of harmless pleasure upon two other persons, as well as a fairly-earned holiday upon myself. So, having concocted my scheme, I imparted it to Jim in the course of the day, and he jumped at it with enthusiasm. We had already agreed to revisit Eton together some time before the close of the season; but to me belongs all the credit of the happy suggestion that Lord Staines, Lady Mildred, Sunning, and Mr. Turner should be added to our party. Jim represented that he was particularly anxious to carry out this plan because it would cheer up Lord Staines, who had been looking tired and worried of late; and of course that may have been his motive. But he

disagreed with me quite sharply when I said that it would be kind to take the old gentleman off Lady Mildred's hands for a day and leave her to enjoy her liberty in London.

"She wouldn't enjoy it at all," he declared; "it would be about the last thing in the world that she would be likely to enjoy. Besides, I don't believe old Staines would go without her. Now, I do hope you won't put forward that idea, Harry; because if you do, the whole thing is certain to fall through."

So I said that, in that case, I wouldn't put it forward; and as both Lady Mildred and her father received our proposition favourably, it only remained for us to beg leave of absence for Sunning and let Mr. Turner know of the treat

that was in store for him. The Bracknells we did not ask; because, for one thing, they would certainly have declined, and also (which was, perhaps, more to the purpose) because we didn't want them.

We all went down from Paddington together in a saloon carriage, Lord Staines as brisk as a bee, Mr. Turner benignly complacent, Sunning dividing his attentions with strict impartiality between his two grandfathers, so as to avoid making either of them jealous, and Lady Mildred and Jim conversing quietly in a corner. And if anybody thinks that it was a cruel sort of kindness to throw the last-mentioned couple together, I can only say that the mischief was already done, and that, in my humble opinion,

when an opportunity of securing a few hours' happiness, without injury to others, presents itself, it ought to be unhesitatingly seized; because such opportunities are rather the exception than the rule in life.

We reached our destination pretty early in the afternoon; and since it was such beautiful hot summer weather that no old gentleman could possibly be the worse for being taken out upon the river, we drove straight to the Brocas. There we hired a roomy craft, into which we packed our party. Lady Mildred undertook to steer; Lord Staines and Mr. Turner were made comfortable with cushions on either side of her; Sunning, after binding himself by a solemn promise not to jump about, was permitted

to crawl into the bows, where he lay flat upon his stomach, as good as gold, the whole time; and Jim taking the stroke oar we pulled them all up to Surly.

I don't know what Jim may have thought about it, but I confess that to me the distance appeared to have enormously increased since the days of my boyhood. However, we took a good long rest, which some of us—two of us, I believe—employed in strolling away across the grass, while the others sat still and enjoyed the peace and quietness of it all, after the turmoil of London; and then in the cool of the evening we dropped leisurely down stream towards Eton once more. Lord Staines, a little excited by the influence of those once familiar scenes, became talkative, and was almost like

his old self again. I could hear him repeating the names of the various landmarks to Sunning, whom he had prevailed upon to sit beside him—names which already sounded a little strangely even to me, though my acquaintance with them was so much more recent than his.

"That's Athens, where you'll bathe when you're a big boy; and Upper Hope —but they won't let you go there till you've passed. The small boys are sent to Cuckoo Weir, where the water is apt to be muddy. Peasoup we used to call it. You must learn to take headers, my boy; I used to be pretty good at it. The great thing is to have confidence, and——"

"Did you ever take a header off

there, grandpapa?" interrupted the boy, pointing up to the railway bridge ahead of us.

Lord Staines had to own that he had never accomplished quite so great a feat as that.

"But father has," Sunning said, in his eager, lisping voice, broken by little gasps. "He took a header off a bwidge —he told me so—and I don't know if it was that bwidge, but it was as high as—as—oh, ever so high! And he did it for a bet—and he said it stung like *fun* — and he wouldn't do it again. But he won his bet."

"Did he?" said the old man, with a troubled look. "Ah, I dare say, I dare say. Don't you bet, my boy; it's a poor game. All that," he added, with a wave

of his hand towards the Great Western viaduct, "is new. It has been put up lately—since I left."

I suppose he must have left somewhere about the year 1830. Very likely he had forgotten, until that casual mention of Bracknell's name occurred, that it was to his grandson, not to his son, that he was talking. After this he was silent and abstracted for a time; but cheered up again when we dined together at the old "Christopher" and drank to the memory of former friends in the best champagne that that establishment could produce. Probably the memory of Lord Staines's school-friends was cherished only by a very small band of survivors; but the old man ran over their names and their exploits, one by one, relating the

merry life that he had led with them and the astounding breaches of discipline of which they had been guilty, until at length Mr. Turner, taking heart of grace, ventured to doubt whether the doings described would have been tolerated by any head-master worthy of his high and responsible post.

"My dear fellow," said Lord Staines, with superb contempt, "what do you know about it? Head-master indeed! But of course you don't understand Eton traditions. You were educated at Harrow, or some such place, weren't you?"

But Mr. Turner was flushed with wine, and did not choose to be sat upon. "Harrovians may be poor sort of creatures in your opinion, Lord Staines,"

he returned ; "but at any rate we can generally show an eleven good enough to beat yours at cricket." Which was an extremely rude thing to say, besides being very false.

I don't know whether the harmony of the evening might not have been seriously interfered with by this unexpected onslaught of the lamb upon the lion, had not Jim jumped up, saying that if we were going to take a look round Eton, we really ought not to lose any more time. Obviously, a single vehicle could not contain us all ; so Jim and Lady Mildred walked on ahead, while the rest of us packed ourselves into a fly and were driven as far as the entrance of the school-yard. Here Lord Staines insisted upon getting out, and managed,

with the help of my arm and his stick, to hobble for some distance across the flag-stones which have been worn smooth by the passing feet of so many generations. Mr. Turner and Sunning wandered away, it was getting late and close upon lock-up time, so that we had the place to ourselves.

The old man, who was leaning upon my arm, paused and looked about him a little wistfully. I could guess from my own sensations what his were likely to be. Everything was so strangely unaltered! There was the old clock-tower, looming high and dark in the twilight; there was the chapel, with the spaces between the buttresses where the lower boys used to play fives sometimes, and where the head-master used to take up

his position to call "absence;" in the middle of the quadrangle, encircled by his iron railing, stood the Pious Founder, with sceptre in one hand and orb in the other, silent and indifferent as of yore; but I and my contemporaries, who had once claimed a sort of property in all these things, had now neither part nor lot in them. We were clean swept away and forgotten, as in a very few years our successors would be also. One can't, at such moments, help feeling a certain tightness about the region of the heart and a sense of personal insignificance which may be salutary, but which is rather painful. But when Lord Staines spoke, it seemed that his thoughts had not been occupied with reminiscences of his own schooldays.

"I recollect," he said, "coming down here one Election Saturday. It was just before Bracknell left; and you and Leigh were leaving at the same time, you know. I walked back from Upper Club with Bracknell, and I remember that we stopped and talked for a moment just about the very spot where we are standing now. He told me he had backed my horse, Jupiter Tonans, by Thunderer, for the Leger, and I warned him that he had better hedge, because, as I dare say you are aware, Thunderers never stay; and sure enough, Jupiter Tonans finished third. I thought at the time that he would have stood a little more preparation—but no matter. Well, you know, Maynard, I suspect that what applies to horses applies pretty much to

ourselves. One hears a good deal about education and training, and example, and this, that, and the other; but when all's said and done, it's breeding that has the last word. Like father, like son. I have been reckless and extravagant all my life; he has followed in my footsteps; and the upshot of it is that we're both deuced nearly ruined now."

I said I was very sorry to hear it.

Lord Staines shook his head. "Bracknell ought to have married money. I always told him so. He chose to marry the parson's daughter, and it caused a coolness between us, as you will remember. I could have overlooked his imprudence and disobedience; but, you see, I didn't think he had behaved well

in the matter—no ; I didn't think he had behaved well."

"It doesn't much signify now," I remarked.

"Not much now, perhaps ; but it was hard upon poor Leigh at the time, and he felt it more than I should have expected. He was speaking to me about it not long since. He is a good fellow, that ; I wish he had a little more money. I looked at him and Mildred this afternoon, and I thought to myself, 'I wish he had a little more money!' Only a fancy, you know."

"I suppose he hasn't nearly enough money?" I hazarded.

"Oh, Lord bless your soul, no!" answered Lord Staines. "Nothing like it!—nothing like it! No—she will have

to marry Beauchamp: and, indeed, she might do worse. Come, Maynard, we'll go on and get into the carriage again; we haven't much more than time to catch the train."

So we moved slowly away to Weston's Yard, where the fly was waiting for us, and where the other members of our small party were already assembled. Jim climbed up on to the box, and we were driven away to the station, Sunning falling asleep before half the distance had been accomplished, and none of us talking much. It was natural that we should be a little tired and disinclined for conversation on the return journey. I myself, I believe, had a nap in the corner of the saloon-carriage; and even if I had been awake, I could not have

scrutinised the countenances of my fellow-travellers in that dim light; but when we alighted in the full glare of Paddington Station, I could not help noticing how pale Jim was, and that Lady Mildred's eyes were suspiciously red.

Lord Staines shook hands with me on the platform. "Good-night, Maynard," he said, "good-night, and thank you for giving us all a very happy day."

Poor old fellow! I think it was the last happy day of his life. His life is over now, and I suppose one cannot say that it was a well-spent one; yet who knows the truth about any man's life! Perhaps, when all secrets are revealed, it may be found that some of those whose statues look down upon us in public places, and whose names are

recorded in history, have a less favourable account to show than this old nobleman, who was worldly, and a spendthrift, who was of little use to the community at large, who took no active part in politics, who excelled in nothing, except, to a limited extent, in the breeding of race-horses; but who never, to my knowledge, was guilty of an ungenerous or dishonourable action, and who, as it seemed to me, gave away more than he received both in the way of money and affection. He was by no means a show specimen of the order to which he belonged, but he possessed some of its good qualities. The coming democracy will doubtless be able to exhibit all these to the world, combined with others into the bargain; and in the meantime,

I regret to say that I have more than once heard Lord Staines spoken of as a standing argument for the abolition of hereditary legislators.

CHAPTER II.

I FELT tolerably sure that I should not have to wait long before receiving a visit and a full confession from Jim. I am accustomed to being utilised (if I may so express myself) as a sort of waste-paper basket or dustbin, into which my friends shoot the cares, anxieties, loves, fears and the like, which they cannot keep to themselves, but which they often hesitate to confide to those nearer and dearer to them. One is glad to be useful in any capacity, however humble,

and I cannot disguise from myself that my great value lies in the patience and attention with which I listen to what is told to me. It is true that I am frequently asked for advice, and sometimes give it; but I cannot at this moment recall a single instance in which it has been acted upon; except, indeed, when it has chanced to coincide with the views of my confidant. The only advice that I could possibly offer to Jim must of necessity be so unpalatable that I determined not to bother him with it. If—as seemed almost certain—Lady Mildred and he had avowed their mutual love down at Eton, the hopelessness of that love must be sufficiently obvious to both of them to stand in need of no emphasising from me; and I thought I might

safely confine myself to expressions of sincere regret. When, however, Jim duly presented himself at my chambers, his avowal did not prove to be in all respects what I had anticipated.

"Harry, old fellow," he began, after he had cast himself down upon my sofa and had assumed a most woebegone air, "I've lost my self-respect."

"I shall be very pleased to assist you in looking about for it," I replied cheerfully, "and I dare say, between us, we shall manage to discover it again. It was mislaid, I presume, somewhere in Windsor or Eton on the afternoon or evening of the 20th instant?"

He nodded. "Well yes; I suppose so. At any rate, I wasn't quite certain of the loss until then. Of course, with

your sharp eyes, you saw long ago how matters were going with me; but I give you my honour that I didn't. Not that it would have made any difference if I had; for one can't help these things. If you had asked me, any time during the last six years, whether I could ever love another woman as I loved the one whom I was once so nearly marrying, I should have laughed at you. Yet that is what has happened to me; and I confess that it makes me feel a little uneasy and ashamed."

I could not see why a man who has remained faithful all his life to a woman who has deceived him and thrown him over should have any particular right to respect himself for being such a dolt, and I said so; but Jim observed that I didn't seem quite to catch his meaning.

"I owe nothing to Hilda," he said, "and it stands to reason that if one has been jilted, one is free. It isn't to her that I have been untrue; it's to myself. I'm too stupid to explain myself; but six years is a longish time, you know, and to find myself madly in love again, after having been quite positive for six years that that was the one sensation which I never could possibly experience a second time, is a little upsetting. It makes me feel that I am not the man I took myself for, and also that I have been a most stupendous fool."

"You have indeed, my dear fellow," I agreed, with ready sympathy.

"Yes, because, now that I look back upon it all, I am convinced that I never was really in love with Hilda. I thought

I was, but it seems to have been a gigantic mistake from first to last; and what sort of opinion can one have of anybody who can make such mistakes as that?"

"Be comforted," I replied, "your case is not without numerous precedents, and so far as you have stated it, it seems to me to be one for plenary absolution. At the same time, if you are so very anxious to frame an indictment against yourself, I think that might be managed without going so far afield. I don't blame you for falling in love with Lady Mildred, for that you couldn't help; but, since you must know as well as I do that you can't marry her, it might perhaps have been a little more considerate not to tell her that you loved her."

"Good Lord!" ejaculated Jim; "you don't suppose I have told her, do you? Why, I never knew it myself until the other day, down at Eton, when the truth flashed upon me all of a sudden. It may seem very ridiculous to you; but I assure you that up to that moment I had been under the impression that I only cared for her as a friend. And it is only as a friend that she thinks of me."

"Really?" said I, somewhat staggered by this announcement. "Then—excuse my curiosity; but what made her eyes so red after you and she had been talking together?"

"Her eyes were red because she had been crying," answered Jim curtly.

He looked so savage that I did not

like to press him with further inquiries; but he resumed by and by of his own accord: "She had been telling me about her family affairs, and a nice mess they seem to have got into! There is no inducing Lord Staines to economise. He has left off racing; but I believe that is the only expense that he has put down; and of course he has to support the Bracknells. In point of fact, I didn't come here to speak to you about myse and Lady Mildred, because that it is a perfectly hopeless business and neither you nor anybody else can help me; but I'm troubled in my mind about Bracknell. He has been very kind and pleasant to me since I have been back; but I know he is in a sea of difficulties and——"

"I expected this," I interrupted, in

some vexation. "So much for his promise! Of course he has been borrowing money of you, and he is just about as likely to repay you as if he were a South American Republic. You may as well make up your mind that you will never see *that* money again."

"Do let a man finish his sentence," remonstrated Jim. "In the first place, he hasn't borrowed a shilling of me, and in the second, it wouldn't distress me in the least if he had borrowed a thousand pounds. But do you know, Harry, sometimes I am half afraid that Bracknell is a scoundrel."

He said this so hesitatingly and with such a look of anxious deprecation on his honest face that I had not the heart to tell him how extremely probable it was

that his apprehensions were well founded, although I could not go so far as to meet him with the contradiction which he evidently hoped for. So I only begged him to be more explicit.

"I suppose you know," he said, "that Bracknell has been several times upon the brink of a smash, and that his father has paid his debts over and over again. Lord Staines is the kind of man who would cheerfully give away ninety-nine pounds if he had only a hundred left in the world, and he seems to have gone on meeting these periodical demands without a murmur, until one fine day he discovered that he couldn't raise another five-pound note by hook or by crook. Then he took to his bed and said he was going to die. Bracknell wanted a

lot of money—how much it was Lady Mildred doesn't know, but she thinks it was a very large sum—to save him from immediate bankruptcy; and the poor old man was so cut up about it that he almost went off his head. He declared that he was the only person to blame; that he had squandered money which ought to have been saved for his son; that he had brought Bracknell up to be extravagant and was bound to see him through, and so forth; and when he was in the midst of his despair, as luck would have it, Alfred Beauchamp came in to see him. "I suppose," added Jim, with a touch of reluctance, "that Beauchamp must be a good fellow. Anyhow, he insisted upon lending his uncle the money; and so——"

"And so Lord Staines rose from his bed and promptly forgot all about the matter," I suggested, as Jim came to a halt.

"No; not exactly that. He told Beauchamp frankly that he didn't think there was much prospect of his ever being able to discharge his debt, but that—that in short he wouldn't so much mind owing the money to his son-in-law as to his nephew. Do you see?"

I could not help laughing at this amazing method of cancelling a liability, which assuredly would never have entered into the head of any human being but Lord Staines. "I can't say that I do see," I replied. "Fathers don't, as a rule, expect to be handsomely paid for allowing their daughters to be taken

off their hands; on the contrary, it is they who are expected to make settlements upon their daughters."

"Yes, but the husband makes settlements too; and it appears that Beauchamp was to deduct this sum from the amount that he would otherwise have settled upon Lady Mildred. Most likely the fact of the matter was that he was overflowing with money, and that he was a good-natured sort of chap, and that he was glad to hold out a helping hand to his uncle. Whether he was really anxious to marry his cousin at that time or not I can't make out; perhaps it was only to pacify the old man that he said he was. But he certainly wasn't in any hurry to change his condition. He begged Lord Staines not to mention the

subject for another year, because he had made arrangements to go off to Newfoundland and Canada for salmon-fishing and couldn't tell how long he might be away, so Lady Mildred never heard a word about it until a few weeks ago, although of course she suspected that it was Beauchamp who had got her father out of his difficulties, and she couldn't help knowing that her people wanted her to marry the man. When she met him again in the beginning of the season he paid her a great deal of attention, and everything seemed to be going smoothly until Lady Bracknell, for reasons best known to herself, took it into her head to put a stop to the affair. You must have seen how easy she has found it to do that. Everybody has seen

it, except Lord Staines, who was frightened at first, but was quite reassured after Bracknell had promised to make his wife drop Beauchamp."

"Bracknell knows about this curious money transaction, then?" I asked.

"He knows now. His father thought it best to tell him when Hilda's game became evident; and that is what makes me afraid that he isn't as straight as he ought to be. Because Lady Bracknell hasn't dropped the man; and when you come to think of it, it is clearly to Bracknell's interest that Beauchamp should remain single."

That was undeniable, but what interested me more than Bracknell's probable bad faith was the singular attitude assumed by Jim, who seemed to be not

only prepared but anxious to give up the girl of his heart to Beauchamp. I ventured to express a little of the surprise that I felt—which had the unexpected effect of making him very angry. What, he wanted to know, did I take him for? And as I made no reply, being unable to hit upon one which should be at the same time truthful and flattering, he went on to explain that true love (a sentiment of which I was evidently ignorant) is in its nature disinterested; that the true lover desires the happiness of the beloved object, not his own; and further that, after what had passed between Lord Staines and Beauchamp, Lady Mildred's marriage with the latter was the only conceivable means of averting disgrace from her family.

"As to the nature of true love," I answered, "I will bow at once to your superior knowledge, although my own limited opportunities of judging would have led me to think otherwise. But with regard to these subtleties about the disgrace which threatens the house of Henley I confess that I can neither follow you nor agree with you. Beauchamp, it seems, has lent money to Lord Staines, and if you say that Lord Staines or his successor is bound in honour to refund the money eventually and to pay interest upon it in the meantime, I am quite with you. But when you assert that honour can only be satisfied by Lady Mildred's marrying, against her will, a man who doesn't want to marry her, you really do get a little beyond my depth."

"Who told you that it would be against her will?" asked Jim.

"My dear Jim," I returned, with excusable impatience, "am I an absolute idiot?"

He did not reply in the negative with that promptitude which I should have expected.

"N—no," he said hesitatingly, after a pause, "but you may be mistaken. So, of course, may I; only I don't think I am. You see, I couldn't ask her point-blank whether she loved the man, could I? All I know is that she had made up her mind to marry him if he asked her, that she thinks it her duty to marry him, and that she is awfully distressed about Bracknell's behaviour. I haven't such a bad opinion of Bracknell as you

have. My belief is that, if matters were put plainly before him, he would see what a dirty business this is and would refuse to have anything more to do with it. And I've a great mind to look him up and tell him what I think."

I endeavoured to dissuade my friend from taking this uncalled-for step; I represented to him, in the prettiest language at my command, that he would do far better to mind his own business, and that if he insisted upon meddling with what did not concern him, he would only get rapped over the knuckles for his pains; but, as I mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, very few people are wise enough to act upon my advice. Jim assured me that he did not in the least mind being rapped over the

knuckles, that he intended to do what he was pleased to call "the straight thing," without regard to personal consequences, and that, for the rest, he was far too unhappy already to be made either more or less so by Bracknell's displeasure.

So I let him go, without attempting to comfort him about Lady Mildred, or telling him what was my own belief with regard to her affections. It would not, I imagine, have made him any happier to know that she was in all probability as unhappy as he, and the prospect of this love-affair reaching a successful issue was so very slight that it seemed best to let it die of inanition, as all love-affairs will, if only sufficient time be allowed them.

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CHAPTER III.

Not long after Jim had left me, I walked down to the club to glance through the evening papers, *sicut meus est mos*, and finding my favourite arm-chair by the window vacant, I settled myself comfortably in it and took up the *St. James's Gazette*. The political article did not look very interesting; so I skipped it and went on to the next, which was printed in smaller type, and was headed "Infants in the Saddle."

"A much-needed warning to parents,"

it began, "will, we may hope, be conveyed by the sad accident to Lord Bracknell's child which we report elsewhere. The wonder is that such accidents are not of more frequent occurrence."

I read no farther, but hurriedly turned over the leaves of the paper until I came upon the following paragraph—

"ACCIDENT IN ROTTEN ROW.—Lord Sunning, the only child of Lord Bracknell, and grandson of the Earl of Staines, was riding in Rotten Row this morning, attended by a groom, when his pony suddenly became unmanageable and bolted. The animal galloped for a considerable distance, then swerved and fell, throwing its rider with great violence against the iron railings. Lord Sunning, who was rendered insensible by the fall,

was at once removed to his father's residence in Wilton Place, where we regret to say that he lies in a precarious condition, having, it is feared, sustained incurable injuries."

I ordered a hansom and started at once for Wilton Place, hoping against hope that the newspaper report might turn out to be an exaggeration. There are calamities against which the reason seems to revolt. "Such a thing cannot be true," one is often inclined to say to oneself; "what would be the good of it?" My dear mother maintains that these trials are sent to us to test our faith, and it is not for me to dispute the truth of her assertion; yet I could not help feeling that if poor little Sunning was to be cut off in the bright morning

of his life for such a purpose, the sacrifice would probably be made in vain. Of all those who loved him there was not one who was likely to lay that lesson to heart, unless indeed it might be old Daddy Turner, who, I suppose, held religious convictions of a kind. Then I remembered what splendid constitutions all the Henleys had, and that Bracknell, as a boy, was for ever tumbling about and escaping scot-free from accidents which would have killed anybody else ; so that by the time that I had reached my destination, I had almost persuaded myself that this would prove to be a case of concussion of the brain which would leave no permanent mischief behind it.

But before the butler who opened the door for me had spoken a word, I knew

that there was no hope. In a few moments I had heard all about it. The great doctors had been and had gone away again, saying that nothing could be done. Sentence of death had been pronounced, and the boy would hardly live until morning. He was conscious now, and had no pain, the butler said. "Perhaps his lordship would see you, sir," he added, in a low voice; "he's bearing up wonderful."

I entered the hall, where several servants were standing about, and one of them went to tell Bracknell that I was there. At the foot of the staircase sat a man in groom's dress, bending forward, with his elbows on his knees and a look of such blank despair upon his face that I could not refrain from making an effort

to comfort him, "It wasn't your fault, you know, James," I said—stupidly enough.

The man lifted his heavy eyes for a moment. "His lordship spoke terrible 'ard to me, sir," he said.

I could well believe it. Men like Bracknell are apt to be cruel and unjust in their grief, and to attack the first person who chances to cross their path; but to them, in their turn, it is an injustice to remember words spoken at such times. I was endeavouring to say as much to the unfortunate James, who, however, did not appear to hear me, when Bracknell came down the stairs, with a slow, steady step. Except that his usually florid complexion had become perfectly colourless, he showed no traces of emotion. He waited until he was

close beside me, and then said, quite quietly, "Sunning has broken his back, Maynard."

All of a sudden the groom burst out crying. I don't know anything more painful and pathetic to witness than the unrestrained weeping of those who belong to what we call the lower orders. It is all very well to say that they feel less deeply than we, who have been schooled to control ourselves; but sometimes I doubt whether they really do feel less deeply, and whether, after all, we have much right to consider ourselves superior to them because, as we assume, our sorrow outlasts theirs. For in truth all sorrow is short-lived enough.

Bracknell glanced at the man, knitting his brows. "James," he said, "I believe

I blamed you just now. I was wrong; you were not to blame. I beg your pardon, James."

He spoke in a hard, level voice. He had made a mistake and apologised for it; but he was not, apparently, moved. Presently he turned away, taking me by the arm and saying, "Come up stairs and see the boy. There is no more suffering now; but he is dying, all the same. Won't last through the night, they say."

I followed him up the stairs and across the landing, wondering a little at his calmness. But with his hand upon the lock of a door, from the other side of which came an audible murmur of voices, he faced about abruptly, his eyes blazing and his white face set.

"Damn that woman!" he exclaimed. "She promised me that the boy should never ride alone again, and she has killed him rather than have one of her cursed flirtations interrupted."

I caught him by the arm to stop him, for his voice rang through the silent house; but he guessed what I was afraid of, and broke into an odd, savage sort of a laugh. "Oh, don't distress yourself," he said; "it's all one to her—*she* doesn't care!"

Then we went into Sunning's room.

The poor little man was lying flat on his back where they had laid him. His cheeks were as white as marble, and his features were pinched and sharp, but of all the crowd of faces which I saw confusedly as I entered, his was the most

cheerful. Lady Bracknell was sitting by the window, pressing her handkerchief to her lips. She looked frightened, I thought. Beside her stood Jim, who, I suppose, had come to the house upon the errand that we know of, and had been admitted. Lady Mildred was there too, and Sunning's old nurse, and Lord Staines, and Mr. Turner; but none of them spoke to me, nor did I venture to do more than glance at them.

Sunning had his dog, a little blue Skye, on the bed beside him. He held out his left hand to me, for his right arm was crushed and powerless, and smiled. We had been friends—more so than I have had any occasion to mention in the course of this narrative—and I think he was glad to see me. He wished me to

have the dog, he said; and I was to take him away with me, please, because he wouldn't lie still much longer, "and he hasn't had his walk to-day." He had a few last words to say to me, but they were only a few; for his strength was evidently ebbing fast, and I could see that his childish brain was pre-occupied. His eyes kept wandering from one member of the group to another, but always rested longest upon his father, whose broad shoulders were turned towards us, and whose elbow I touched at last, feeling sure that the boy wanted to speak to him.

Bracknell wheeled round hastily, and dropped on his knees beside the bed. "Yes, my boy," he said; "what is it?"

"Father," whispered Sunning, "you

won't have Sheila shot, will you? I don't want Sheila to be shot."

His eyes grew very large and piteous, and there was a quiver about the corners of his mouth. No doubt he had had some experience of his father's passionate nature and feared that, in a fit of unreasoning fury, he might take vengeance upon the irresponsible cause of his son's death.

But Bracknell answered gruffly, "No, my boy, nobody shall harm her. I'll swear that."

Sunning gave a little sigh of relief, looked curiously at his father for a moment, and then turned his head towards Lord Staines, who was sitting motionless on the other side of the bed, in what seemed like a state of nerveless stupor.

"Never mind, gran," he said; "it doesn't hurt." And then, "You're so awfully old, too, gran—you'll come soon."

Lord Staines made no answer, but Mr. Turner rose and approached, wiping the tears away from his foolish old eyes with a large silk pocket-handkerchief. "We shall go to you; but you will not come back to us, Sunning," he began. I don't care to quote the rest of his remarks. He was a cleric of the old-fashioned school, who had not, I should imagine, occupied himself much with the subject of eschatology. It was, perhaps, right that he should give utterance to his views, which, I am sure, were at any rate sincere; but those stereotyped phrases about the New Jerusalem and white-winged angels and golden harps,

enunciated with a certain pomposity, despite the occasional quavering of the speaker's voice, jarred somewhat upon my ears, as I dare say they did upon those of several other persons present. Sunning listened patiently. Thank God, he had not many sins, even of a childish kind, to reproach himself with. He had always been a good boy, as well as a brave one, and had no need to dread the unknown future, be that what it may.

After a time, he beckoned to me and put the dog into my arms. "Good-bye, Bluey," he whispered. The dog licked his face and he patted its rough head, and then for the first time two great tears welled up into his eyes and brimmed over.

I bent over him and kissed him, and

then I picked up the dog and went away. I had no right to intrude upon the scene which I could see was close at hand; and besides, to tell the truth, I couldn't bear it any longer. Many sadder things than a child's death are happening in the world every hour. One may look back upon it dispassionately now and say that it was perhaps well that our poor little Sunning should have been taken from us—that if he had lived, he might not have been happy; that he would almost certainly have been badly brought up; that he would have succeeded to a diminished property; that he would very likely have followed in the steps of his father and grandfather, with less means at his disposal, and consequently greater temptations than theirs, and so forth; but the fact remains

that he was the brightest and most promising child I have ever known, and that, humanly speaking, his life was cut short because his mother did not choose to take the trouble of looking after him.

CHAPTER IV.

EVERYBODY expected that the loss of his grandson would be poor old Lord Staines's death blow. He himself was of that opinion, and at first refused to leave his bed, saying that he had now nothing to live for. But perhaps, upon further thought, he may have remembered that he had still certain matters to attend to before quitting a troublesome world, or perhaps he may have been too old and worn out to die of grief. At any rate, he did not die, nor did his health

appear to suffer, although I believe he was never seen to smile again after Sunning's little coffin was laid in the family vault at Staines Court.

Lady Bracknell did not appear at the funeral. It was believed—or at all events it was stated—that she felt unable to face so cruel an ordeal; but the truth, as I afterwards heard upon excellent authority, was that she was afraid to venture within reach of her husband, who had ordered her away from him immediately after the boy's death, assuring her that he was not master of himself and that she would do well to keep out of his sight for some time to come. So she took him at his word and fled down to the country, to the house of I forget what friend, who undertook to comfort her in her affliction.

Bracknell remained in London, and, as I was told, continued to go to his club every day, to gamble heavily and to drink hard.

The uses of adversity are doubtless sweet to some people ; but there are others to whom adversity is neither sweet nor useful, and Bracknell belonged to the latter category. His was essentially a fighting nature, and so long as he had anybody or anything to fight against his blood was likely to be kept in a tolerably healthy state ; but he was not a man who could be benefited by defeat or disaster. Passionate, headstrong, and spoilt by the continuous prosperity of his youth, he resented the various misfortunes of his more mature years as so many affronts directed at him by

Heaven, and when this crowning calamity descended upon him, avenged himself by going over to the devil. I don't mean to say that he put the case before himself in those terms; but I believe they express pretty accurately what his feeling was. I called upon him several times, but he was always out; and one day when I chanced upon him in the street, he told me roughly that I need not trouble to look him up again.

"Kindly meant, I've no doubt," he said; "but I should be very much obliged to my friends if they wouldn't be so—&c., &c.—officious. When I want to be condoled with I'll let them know."

After that I could only leave him to himself. Even if he had been willing to listen to me, I should have been puzzled

to discover any plausible form of consolation; and certainly I should not have hit upon that selected by my mother, who, in the overflowing kindness of her heart, wrote him a long letter, in which she reminded him that, among other blessings, he still possessed his wife. I believe she was afterwards a little ashamed of having taken this bold step, and would never have let me know of it had she been able to resist showing me Bracknell's reply, which was brief and pithy :—

"DEAR MRS. MAYNARD,—I told your son the other day that I didn't want to be condoled with; and I don't. But I must say that I hardly expected to be congratulated. Lady Bracknell is not with

me just now, or she would, I am sure, desire me to thank you for speaking of her as a blessing. It is probably the first time in her life that she has been called by that name, and I should think it would be the last.

"Sincerely yours,

"BRACKNELL."

My mother shook her head at this. "He ought not to speak so of his wife," she said. And when I brought forward certain excuses on Bracknell's behalf (I would not shock her by mentioning all those that might have been mentioned, nor would she have believed in them if I had) she only shook her head the more, telling me that I had no realising sense of the sacredness of marriage.

Whether I deserved that rebuke or not is of small consequence; but I might fairly have retorted that my dear mother, for her part, was a little too sublimely indifferent to the worldly side of that contract, and that by her present conduct she was in danger, not only of making two people more unhappy than there was any occasion for, but of getting herself into serious trouble as well. However, I doubt whether anything that I could have said would have prevented her from asking Lady Mildred to come in to tea every other day, and then casually getting Jim to meet her. She had made up her mind that this couple ought to be married, and even that it was the will of Heaven that they should be married. It would have been too much to expect that the

will of Heaven should be set aside to please Lord Staines or Mr. Beauchamp; the latter of whom, as my mother pointed out, might have proposed long ago, if he had chosen, but had preferred to go off to Norway and catch salmon.

And so, during that summer, our house was made the scene of what, to a commonplace person like myself, wore very much the appearance of clandestine love-making. I don't know what Jim and Lady Mildred talked about while they wandered up and down our lawn together. They did not honour me with their confidence; and indeed I was sorry to observe a decided inclination on their part, as well as on that of my mother, to send me to Coventry. Did they think, I wonder, that I should betray them to

Lord Staines? They ought to have known me better; but I am more or less accustomed to being misjudged by those who ought to know me better; and I may add that I have never been deterred by that circumstance from doing to them as I would be done by.

That this is no vain boast will be seen from the tone which I took up when Lord Staines's suspicions were at length aroused, and when he sent for me to pour them into my ear. It was on a fine autumn day that, in obedience to his summons, I walked up to Staines Court and was shown into the library, where he now sat from morning to night, and where, in spite of the warmth of the weather, a fire was burning. He looked very feeble and broken, bending forward

in his chair and holding up a thin, trembling hand to the blaze.

"Maynard," he said, "I want you, like a good fellow, to speak a word of warning to your friend Leigh. I would rather not speak myself, because, as you know, he has been caused trouble and disappointment by our family already, and I should be sorry to seem unfriendly to him. So will you just tell him as kindly as you can that it won't do? I see more than perhaps you young folks suppose, and of course you know what I allude to. It won't do, my dear Maynard. I am sorry for it; but it won't do."

"Lord Staines," I answered boldly, "I am not going to undertake any such commission. I can quite understand

your anxiety to keep the Beauchamp property in the family, and if you can get the persons principally concerned to do as you wish, I dare say it will be in some respects a good thing; but I don't choose to be a party to any scheme of that kind. My point of view is not the same as yours. What may become of the Beauchamp property is nothing to me; whereas it is a good deal to me that Jim Leigh should have what he wishes for. I believe that Lady Mildred and he are attached to each other, and, that being so, I hope they will stand up for themselves and marry."

I fully expected that this audacious harangue would call forth an explosion of wrath; but my expectations were not fulfilled. Lord Staines only sighed wearily

and said: "God knows I care little enough for money or lands now! My time is almost up, and I suppose Bracknell will be the last of our name. Against Leigh I haven't a word to say; only, as I told you before, it won't do. Mildred must marry Beauchamp. I am under obligations to him which can't be discharged in any other way; and he will be a kind husband to her. We won't argue the point, if you please."

"He will not be a husband of her choosing," I made so bold as to observe, despite this prohibition.

"You don't know what you are talking about," returned the old man fretfully. "The thing must be, and there's no use in discussing it. If you don't see your way to speaking to your

friend, I must speak to Mildred, that's all."

I said nothing about this conversation to those whom it concerned, and whether Lord Staines carried out his intention of remonstrating with Lady Mildred or not I cannot tell. Very likely he did not, for I fancy that he shrank from distressing her, and he may have thought it needless to take active steps before Beauchamp's return from Norway.

No news with regard to that event reached my ears, and it was not until late in the autumn that I was made aware of its having taken place, by encountering Beauchamp himself at a country house in the north of England, where I had been invited to spend a few days. It struck me that our meeting

was not a source of unalloyed satisfaction to him. There was even a sort of shamefacedness in his demeanour which I could not at first account for, but which explained itself at dinner-time, when Lord and Lady Bracknell made their appearance among several other guests who had arrived late in the afternoon, and when her ladyship exchanged meaning glances with my young friend, after according him a conventionally polite greeting.

The Bracknell *ménage*, which for a time had been threatened with disruption, had been set agoing once more (by the kindly intervention of friends, as I was informed), and was, to all appearance, being conducted upon much the same principles as heretofore. At all

events, Bracknell seemed to look with absolute indifference upon the renewal of the flirtation which he had once professed himself determined to check. The past few months had worked a very perceptible change in him. He had grown stouter; his complexion had become pasty and his eyelids heavy, and a few grey hairs had appeared about his temples. His manners, too, had distinctly deteriorated. He was bored, and did not attempt to disguise the fact; moreover, he displayed a contradictious and quarrelsome tendency which evidently caused some anxiety to our hostess.

As for Lady Bracknell, she was brilliant and radiant. Her black dress and jet ornaments threw up the dazzling

whiteness of her skin; she looked as if she had not a care in the world; and if, as I suspect, the other ladies were whispering to each other what a heartless wretch the woman was, I can only say that in my humble opinion they had a very good right to do so.

Probably neither their remarks nor my opinion were matters of much moment to her. She was a cold-hearted and calculating woman, but she was capable, no doubt, of enjoying herself after her own fashion, and few things can be more pleasant than to indulge in your favourite pastime, while making it subserve a definite, practical end. This, for the time being, appeared to be Lady Bracknell's enviable lot. The subjugation of Beauchamp was complete. He remained

by her side the whole evening through; he scarcely took his eyes off her for a moment; and it may be assumed that he had no idea of the sorry spectacle that he presented to lookers-on. Some of these were very severe in their strictures upon him and upon his companion. More than one lady openly declared that she would not have Lady Bracknell in her house; but I knew very well (and so, I doubt not, did her ladyship), that they would ask her to their houses, and furthermore, that they would ask Beauchamp to meet her. I have often wondered why ladies to whom scandals are abhorrent should act in this way; and such is my simplicity that I am wondering still, in spite of many keys to the puzzle which have been offered to

me. But that it is their habit so to do will hardly be denied.

Hilda, then, without any fear of being ostracised, gave free play to her peculiar talents and spent a delightful evening. It would have been amusing and instructive to watch her, if one had not detested her so cordially. She had a second string to her bow in the shape of a certain Comte de Vieuzac, a French *attaché*, whom I had met several times in Wilton Place. De Vieuzac was one of those semi-Anglicised Gauls who get their clothes made in London, whose talk is of horses and shooting, and who discuss sport with a solemnity far exceeding that of their models. Being young, by no means bad-looking, and full of that confidence in the irresistible nature

of his charms which is the very last thing that his countrymen can bring themselves to part with, he most likely flattered himself that he had made a conquest of Lady Bracknell, and it was easy to see that he found Beauchamp a good deal in the way. That Beauchamp reciprocated his sentiments with interest was not less obvious; and while one of the young men assumed an aggravatingly supercilious mien and the other scowled savagely, Hilda, arbitress of the contest, sat between them, displaying her white teeth and gently swaying a black ostrich-feather fan.

In nearly all human situations, tragedy and comedy are blended, so that *Jean-qui-pleure* and *Jean-qui-rit* may comment upon them with equal complacency and

an equal half-measure of truth. Sometimes one feels disposed to take the side of the laughing, sometimes that of the weeping philosopher. In the exhibition to which Lady Bracknell was so kindly treating us I suppose the comic element may be said to have predominated, and perhaps that was why I was unable to see anything funny in it. Somehow or other, the sight of that smiling, contented, selfish woman, playing off her admirers one against the other, infuriated me. I could not get the memory of poor little Sunning out of my head while I watched her ; it seemed to me that of all forms of depravity the most odious is that which obliterates the natural, animal instinct of maternal love. And my soul being stirred within me by the spectacle of the power

possessed and exercised by that woman, who, if she had had her deserts, would have been picking oakum in Millbank Penitentiary, I could at last contain myself no longer, but, rising from my sequestered corner, crossed the room, with the intent to do a truly silly thing.

I made straight for the sofa on which Bracknell was sitting apart, with his hands in his pockets, and asked him whether he didn't want to smoke.

"Of course I do," he growled. "Why the dickens don't these people go to bed?"

"We will give them the slip," said I, for I was bent upon having a few words in private with him. "Now is our time, while nobody is looking."

So I got him away to the smoking-room, and, as soon as we had lighted our cigars, plunged, head first, into the middle of my subject. "Bracknell," said I, "do you or do you not intend Beauchamp to marry your sister?"

I have mentioned already that Bracknell's manners had deteriorated. He frowned heavily and asked me what the devil that was to me.

"I will tell you," I answered. "You must admit, I think, that you haven't behaved very well to Jim Leigh——"

"Good Lord!" interrupted Bracknell, "are you going back to that old story again? Why, man, I made him an apology when he reappeared in London last summer! What more would you have? I can assure you that I repent

from the bottom of my heart of having deprived him of Miss Hilda Turner."

"I don't doubt it," I replied; "I only meant to remind you that you owe him a good turn. I can't go into particulars, because we shall have the other men in here presently, but the long and the short of it is that Lady Mildred and he are in love with each other."

"Oh, indeed!" said Bracknell. "Well —really I don't care."

"Does that mean," I inquired, "that you won't oppose their marriage?"

"It means," answered he, "that I shall not bother myself about the matter, one way or the other. Jim had better fight it out with the governor."

I ought, I suppose, to have been contented with that. I had not behaved

with my usual circumspection in introducing the subject at all, and I had received an assurance which, so far as it went, should have been entirely satisfactory to me. But, being so exasperated with Hilda, and being also curious to learn how far Hilda's absolute lack of principle was shared by her husband, I must needs proceed to remark:

"You once told Lady Bracknell in my presence that you would not permit her to entice Beauchamp away from your sister. You have changed your mind as to that, it appears."

Bracknell rose slowly from his chair, advanced to that in which I was seated, and placed a heavy hand on each of my shoulders, looking straight into my eyes. "Maynard," said he, "you aren't a bad

sort of fellow, taking you all round; but you're just as cheeky now as you used to be at Eton, and I may as well tell you at once that I'm not in the humour to put up with cheek. Do you remember my giving you a licking once in Keate's Lane?"

"No," I replied, "I do not. I remember your hitting me and I remember kicking you on the shins, and I remember old Jim Leigh coming between us."

"Well," said Bracknell, "I dare say it was no bad thing for you that Jim Leigh happened to be handy. I didn't want to thrash you then and I don't want to thrash you now; but if you take upon yourself to interfere with my private affairs a second time, by the Lord, I'll knock your head off your shoulders!"

This threat, which was embellished by certain expressions which I prefer not to transcribe, caused me to reflect. I do not suppose that Bracknell could have knocked my head off my shoulders, but it is quite possible that he might have managed to give me a black eye; and really I cannot afford to be seen going about with a black eye. Therefore I resolved to abstain from further provocation; and at this opportune moment our interview was interrupted by the entrance of our host, accompanied by a large detachment of his guests.

CHAPTER V.

I HAVE read in books and I have repeatedly heard it stated in conversation that the right time for a literary man to do his work is early in the morning; that the brain, refreshed by sleep, is then at its clearest, and that ideas flow from it with delightful rapidity while the dew is still upon the grass. The theory has a plausible sound, and may, for aught I know, be found to work satisfactorily by those who possess brains of a superior order; but my own brain,

which is but a poor piece of mechanism at best and requires a good deal of humouring, is utterly intractable during the first few hours of the day, and the only results that I have ever obtained from attempting to set it in motion against its will have been a bad headache and a worse temper. I am therefore obliged to perform the greater part of my daily task after other people have retired to bed; and the consequence is that I generally eat my breakfast some time after other people have finished theirs. This habit of mine is not without advantages of which I am especially sensible when staying in a country house; for to be obliged to make polite conversation at 9.30 A.M. is only a shade less painful than to com-

pose an article at the same hour. There are, I am aware, houses in which one is punished for appearing late at the breakfast-table by being made to partake of cold tea and the repulsive remains of dishes upon which one's predecessors have been feasting; but nobody, it may be hoped, is absolutely compelled to visit at such houses.

On the day following that of which I spoke in the last chapter I descended from my room when the clocks were striking half-past ten, with a comfortable certainty that I should find something hot awaiting me in the dining-room. What I certainly did not expect to find there was Lady Bracknell, attended by her brace of devoted admirers. There, however, they were, all three of them,

and I perceived at once that Hilda had resumed the game of the previous evening. It was a game of which, as I knew, she never wearied. She had the appearance of being well satisfied with it now; which was more than could be said for either of the other players.

"After all," she was remarking, as I entered, "I can't see why we should give ourselves airs because we ride and shoot better than most other nations. That is something, of course; but there are so many other ways in which the French, for instance, are our superiors. They are a great deal more amusing to talk to, and they are more artistic, and they write better novels. Mr. Maynard, aren't French novels much better than ours?"

I said I must decline to deliver judgment upon that point; it was a matter of taste.

"Well, but," broke in Beauchamp, who was looking decidedly cross, "I never denied it. I'm sure I don't know whether their novels are better than ours, and, to tell you the truth, I don't much care either. All I said was that they are not a sporting people."

"There is more variety of sport in France than in England," said de Vieuzac boldly. "We have, for example, the wolf and the wild boar——"

"And you gallop after 'em in green and gold coats, with horns twisted round and round your bodies," interrupted Beauchamp, not over courteously.

"You have perhaps derived your ideas

of French sport from the pictures in *Punch*," observed de Vieuzac, without losing his temper. "They are funny, those pictures, they are very funny; but I do not think that the artists have drawn them from life."

"I have been in France," returned the other doggedly, "and I've seen a lot of *chasseurs*, as you call them, shooting cock-sparrows on Sunday afternoons."

De Vieuzac shrugged his shoulders. "You will come to it, my good friend," said he. "What would you have? We are a little in advance of you; we made our revolution a hundred years ago. When your game-laws are abolished, when your great estates are broken up, when your country squires can no more live upon their rents—then you will see

what you will see. For the rest, the persons who, as you say, shoot sparrows on Sundays are not of the rank who would shoot partridges if they were Englishmen; and you must not ask of a man that he should be a good game-shot when he has never the occasion to shoot at game."

"At any rate," observed Hilda, rising and bestowing a gracious smile upon the speaker, "we all know that M. de Vieuzac can shoot as well as anybody. And isn't it time for you to go out shooting now?"

Beauchamp held the door open for her.

"We are to have a ride this afternoon, are we not?" I heard him ask eagerly.

"Of course, we are," she answered. "Didn't you promise to take me out?"

And then, turning to the other, "M. de Vieuzac, I am going to be very selfish and make you join us. You will have to tear yourself away from the partridges and be in time for luncheon."

The Frenchman raised his eyebrows slightly and bowed, murmuring something about Lady Bracknell's wishes being law. Possibly he thought that a ride in company with his rival would not be very good fun.

As for Beauchamp, he did not attempt to conceal his disgust. "Perhaps you will ride with me some other day. If I'm not wanted I'd just as soon shoot this afternoon," he was beginning; but the closing of the door deprived me of the remainder of his sentence, as well as of Hilda's reply. However, it was

pretty certain that he would do what she ordered him, whether he liked it or not.

After I was left alone, I spent some five minutes of my valuable time in wondering why Lady Bracknell had asked de Vieuzac to spoil poor Beauchamp's afternoon. Were I a lady of great personal attractions, I should, I dare say, enjoy having several admirers; but I should certainly prefer to take them one at a time. That a second may be found useful as a means of stimulating the ardour of the first I can understand; but the object of keeping them together after that result has been fully obtained is not so easy to discover. Sometimes I have an uncomfortable fear that my tutor was right in the opinion which he

expressed about me long ago, and that I am not quite as clever as I think myself. I ought undoubtedly to have guessed what her ladyship was up to, and my only comfort is in the reflection that if I failed to do so, it was because my estimate of human nature is pitched too high.

I did not go out shooting with Bracknell and the others that morning, nor was I able to put in an appearance at the luncheon hour. I had to finish an admirable essay upon Proportional Representation for the *Eclectic Review,* and, getting my arguments into a knot towards the last pages (which, I am sorry to say, is no uncommon experience of mine when composing admirable essays), I was chained to my desk until

the afternoon was far advanced, struggling to reconcile certain irreconcileable statements to which I had committed myself, and which I was unwilling to retract. Having at length made up my mind to throw one of these overboard for the sake of harmony, I wound up my task and sallied forth to take the air.

The house in which I was staying stood in the midst of one of those wild, undulating parks which are more frequent in the northern than in the southern counties, and which look like a survival of the England of three hundred years ago. It was very beautiful in its way, under the grey, autumnal sky, with shafts of pale sunlight falling upon the gnarled oaks and the withered bracken, and upon patches of gorse and heather here and

there. I had walked some distance across it and was wondering whether de Vieuzac's unpleasant prophecy would ever be fulfilled—whether the land upon which I was standing would ever be parcelled out among peasant proprietors, and whether, in that case, the peasant proprietors would not find out that they had made an uncommonly bad bargain, when the thud of approaching hoofs interrupted my musings, and presently Lady Bracknell, riding between her two cavaliers, hove in sight.

They were pleased to draw rein on recognising me, and Hilda said they had had a delightful ride ; which assertion was received with emphatic silence by her companions. In all probability some bickering had taken place during the

course of it, for the two men were looking daggers at each other, and it struck me that de Vieuzac was not quite as cool as he had been earlier in the day. A short distance ahead of us was an inclosure, surrounded by a high fence of posts and rails, like a large cattle-pen. It may have been intended to serve that purpose, or possibly, at certain seasons of the year, to confine the red-deer, of which there was a herd in the park.

"There," said de Vieuzac, pointing to it with his whip, and looking at Beauchamp, "would be a pretty leap. You could take it, perhaps?—you who hesitate at nothing."

"Oh, do, Mr. Beauchamp!" exclaimed Hilda enthusiastically.

"My dear Lady Bracknell," I remon-

strated, "what are you thinking of? The thing is absolutely impossible."

I am not sure that it was impossible; I am an indifferent judge of matters of that kind, and I have read wonderful accounts of the high jumps accomplished by Australian horses. But I should certainly be very sorry either to attempt such a feat myself, or to see any friend of mine attempt it. Hilda did not seem to have heard me.

"Oh, do try!" she repeated. "I know you would get over all right."

Beauchamp's reply was highly creditable to his good sense and self-control. "I might get over," he said. "Whether I could get out again is another question. But, anyhow, I couldn't think of risking it with another man's horse."

De Vieuzac smiled; and Beauchamp turned upon him at once. "What's that you say?" he asked sharply.

"I assure you," answered the Frenchman, with exaggerated politeness, "that I did not utter one word."

"You were thinking something though."

"Oh, for that, yes. I was thinking something, I admit. I was thinking that sometimes it is very convenient to be riding a friend's horse."

The words amounted to a studied insult, and would unquestionably have been so accepted in de Vieuzac's own country. In France speeches of that kind are permissible, their consequences being, of course, well understood; but neither in France nor elsewhere is it

customary to offer such direct provocation in the presence of a lady, and Beauchamp went up several degrees in my esteem when he answered quietly: "We'll discuss the question afterwards, if you like. We may as well ride on now."

Hilda suddenly broke into a short laugh, touched her horse with the whip and galloped away. The two men followed her. I confess that I hurried back to the house as fast as my legs would carry me. I dislike and deprecate quarrels above everything; still, if quarrels must needs take place, why should I not be there to see? After de Vieuzac's inexcusable conduct, I felt that it would be a real satisfaction to me to see him knocked down, and I thought

that if I made great haste, I might just manage to arrive in time. As it turned out, I reached the front door with several minutes to spare. From the flight of steps which led up to it I could descry the riders, who, perhaps, had made a *détour*, approaching at a foot's pace, and presently I had the honour of assisting Lady Bracknell to dismount.

She stood for a moment, tapping her foot with her riding-whip, and looking with an odd, satirical expression at the rivals. "*Au revoir*," she said, nodding to them; "I am going to lie down till dinner-time." Then she made a scarcely perceptible sign with her hand to Beauchamp, who ran up the steps after her into the house.

De Vieuzac and I remained where we

were. I suppose we both knew that Beauchamp would be out again directly. And indeed, the horses had hardly been led away to the stables before he emerged and made straight for us.

"M. de Vieuzac," said he, "you hinted just now that I was a coward. May I ask whether that was what you meant?"

The Frenchman straightened his back, brought his heels together, twirled his moustache, and replied: "You are at liberty, sir, to place any construction upon my words that may suit your pleasure."

"In good English, I suppose that means that you want to fight. If you had been an Englishman, I should have hit you straight between the eyes, and it would have done you a lot of good; but

as you're a foreigner, I'm afraid we can't settle it that way."

"The method," observed de Vieuzac sweetly, "seems a little barbarous. For me, I confess that I have not learnt to box; but with the sword or the pistol I shall be charmed to hold myself at your disposition. You do not, perhaps, use those weapons?"

"Oh, don't we though!" returned Beauchamp, with a short laugh. "I shall be happy to prove the contrary to you when and where you please; only of course it can't be in this country. If it's the same thing to you, I should prefer to stay out my time here; but next week I will meet you at Ostend or any other place you choose to name."

The Frenchman bowed. "It is usual,"

said he, "to leave all details to be arranged by the seconds in these affairs. Will you then be so kind as to mention two gentlemen whose names and addresses I may give to the friends whom I shall ask to represent me?"

Beauchamp rubbed the back of his head. "I don't want this talked about all over the place, you know," he said. "Maynard, you've heard it all; perhaps you'll be good enough to act for me—and find some other fellow who can hold his tongue. And look here," he added, turning to de Vieuzac; "we had better pretend to be friends for the next few days. Don't you think so?"

"Sir," replied the Frenchman magnificently, "I shall withdraw. I should be desolated to be the occasion of

embarrassment, and I will leave for London to-morrow."

With that, he took off his hat, bowing low. Beauchamp stared, looked rather inclined to laugh, then nodded and turned back into the house. And so this sanguinary encounter was agreed upon.

CHAPTER VI.

As a matter of theory, it has always seemed to me that the *duello* is, upon the whole, the best means that can be devised of wiping out a mortal affront or injury. It would, no doubt, be intolerable that one should be called upon to stand up and be shot at because some bully or other had purposely trodden upon one's toe; and we are accustomed to hear that it was in order to put a stop to such highly unpleasant liabilities that duelling was suppressed in England.

Nevertheless, it is not easy to say what ought to be done to a man who calls you a coward to your face. To take no notice is hardly within the capacity of the meekest of mortals; to appeal for protection to the law is no salve for wounded honour; and so there seems to be nothing for it but a scrimmage with fists or walking-sticks. Now I must say that every affray of that kind which has taken place in my time (and there have been several such) has been supremely ridiculous and undignified: therefore, pacific though my own nature is, and much as I should hate to see the sword-point of an adversary quivering within an inch of my nose, I am inclined to think that the duel ought to have been retained as an ultimate resort. Such being

my sentiments, and Beauchamp having been most unequivocally and grievously insulted by de Vieuzac, I could not but applaud the course taken by the former. However, it is one thing to approve of a given quarrel in the abstract and quite another to allow oneself to be mixed up in it, to see one's name mentioned and one's private character discussed in all the newspapers, and even perhaps to be haled before the authorities and cast into prison. Deep, then, would have been my consternation when my young friend so coolly nominated me as his second, if I had thought that there was any probability of my actually figuring in that capacity; and the genial alacrity with which I accepted the greatness thrust upon me was, I allow, due solely to the

circumstance that I had not the remotest intention of permitting a hostile meeting to occur.

The line of conduct which I adopted, with a view to avert bloodshed, was simple, and, as I flattered myself, likely to prove effectual. I slipped away from the dinner-table, that evening, a little before the other men, and, hurrying into the drawing-room, seated myself beside Lady Bracknell, who was reclining in an easy-chair apart, and was doubtless waiting for one or other of her victims to join her.

"Allow me," said I (for I was resolved not to spare her), "to congratulate you upon your energy and determination. If you could have persuaded Beauchamp to break his neck at that fence this

afternoon, it would have been very nice. You would have been an immensely rich woman at this moment, and probably nobody, except my unworthy self, would have suspected you of being a murderess, in addition to your other claims to notoriety. But the wretched creature wouldn't jump, and so you had to fall back upon your original plan of inducing that Frenchman to challenge him and kill him. I am sorry to disappoint you; but that plan of yours will have to be abandoned. You must try to cook Beauchamp's goose in what the cookery books call 'another way.'"

Hilda burst into scornful laughter. "What in the world are you talking about?" she asked. "Have you lost your senses?"

"Not at all," I replied; "I retain possession of them and place a modest reliance upon their evidence. But surely yours were not quite as acute as usual when you cast yourself for the part of Lucrezia Borgia. Tragedy, believe me, is not your forte, and as often as you attempt it you will break down. Don't you see that if this rather diabolical plot of yours had succeeded, you would never have been able to show your face in any decent society again? Do you really imagine that there would have been the slightest doubt in anybody's mind as to who had instigated the duel between two men whom you have been openly endeavouring to set by the ears ever since your arrival here? The best thing that you can do now is to get your fire-eating

Frenchman to make an apology, which you will instruct Beauchamp to accept."

Hilda's face was not ordinarily an expressive one; but as she turned it towards me now, there swept across it a look of such vindictive malice that I inwardly recanted my criticism upon her tragic capabilities. However, she soon subdued that passing emotion and laughed again. "I don't in the least understand you," she declared; "I know nothing of any duel, and how can I help it if a couple of foolish young men choose to quarrel? It appears to me that you have been drinking too much wine, and I should be much obliged if you would go away for the present."

"With pleasure," I replied, rising.

"Do you absolutely refuse, then, to be a peacemaker?"

"I refuse," she answered, somewhat defiantly, "to be dictated to by you. I don't believe what you say, and I shall not make myself ridiculous by trying to smooth down a quarrel which most likely exists only in your imagination."

That was all that I obtained from her; but in truth I had not expected more; and in addressing such very plain-spoken remarks to her I had been actuated rather by curiosity as to how she would take them than by any hope that they would divert her from her purpose. The person whom I did hope to influence was de Vieuzac. Him I waylaid an hour later, as he was entering the smoking-room,

and drew him away into the billiard-room, which adjoined that apartment, and which, fortunately, was untenanted.

"M. de Vieuzac," I began, "it is quite out of the question that you should fight young Beauchamp, and I think you will admit as much when I have given you my reasons for saying so."

He interrupted me with suave courtesy, observing that the subject was no longer one which he could properly discuss. Any remarks which I might have to make must be addressed to his friends the Comte de Something and the Marquis de Something-else, who would not fail to call upon me in due course.

I replied that it would be needless to give his friends that trouble. "Of course," I continued, "you will not pretend that

the ostensible cause of your quarrel is the real one."

"The cause of quarrel," returned he, "is of perfect simplicity. I have used words which I decline to withdraw and by which Mr. Beauchamp conceives himself to be wounded. And permit me once more, sir, to tell you that this conversation is most irregular."

"I dare say it is," I rejoined, "but you had better listen to me, all the same. The lady who is at the bottom of all this ——"

"Mr. Maynard," interrupted de Vieuzac, "it is impossible that I should listen to you. You scandalise me—positively you scandalise me! What! you speak of a lady!—you would perhaps in another moment go so far as to mention her by

name! It is unheard of! I must beg of you, sir, to excuse me." And he made for the door.

"Very well," said I, "have it your own way, then, if you are determined to bring about an explosion. Since you insist upon it, your friends shall talk the affair over with me and with Lord Bracknell, who will be my coadjutor."

De Vieuzac paused upon the threshold and pulled his moustache. "Lord Bracknell!" he ejaculated. "Is that Mr. Beauchamp's choice, may I ask?"

"Oh, no; it is my choice. You heard him give me leave to select a colleague, and such is the selection that I propose to make."

This brought the Frenchman to his bearings. He returned slowly and

consented under protest, to hear me. "What is it that you have to say?" he inquired.

"Why, simply this," I replied. "Mr. Beauchamp, as you are probably not aware, is the present holder of very large estates, which, in the event of his dying without issue, would pass to his cousin, Lord Bracknell. Consequently, if he were to die suddenly within a short time, a certain lady whose name we won't mention would be snatched from the brink of bankruptcy and raised to a position of great wealth. Now, suppose that, by a misadventure which I am sure you would be the first to deplore, but which you might not be able to avert, you were to kill that young man. What do you think would be said of you and of the

unnamed lady? Or suppose, without going so far as that, that you only wounded him. Is it not certain that everybody would declare that you had done your best to kill him? To me, at any rate, it is very evident that the insult which you offered him to-day was a mere pretext, and that you had deliberately made up your mind to fasten a quarrel upon him."

The Frenchman's countenance, while I was speaking, exhibited various phases of emotion; but now he blazed forth with sudden fury and sprang at me like a wild cat. "Sir," he hissed out, "do you dare to accuse me of being an assassin?"

"Certainly not," I replied, drawing back a few paces as a precautionary measure,

"but I think you are in some danger of incurring that accusation from others." Then, as he eyed me in a suspicious manner and appeared to be hesitating, I continued: "Allow me, as an insular barbarian, to speak the truth to you without phrases. The fact is that you have been made a cat's-paw of by the most thoroughly unscrupulous woman of my acquaintance. I venture to think that it would be more consistent with your honour and dignity to apologise to Beauchamp, whom you can't really believe to be a coward, than to fight him for the sake of Lady Bracknell, whom I have known all my life, and who, I can assure you, is not worth a drop of honest blood. In any case, depend upon it that we shall not allow our man to go out with

you. Lord Bracknell would not dare to sanction such a meeting, even if he were —what I am convinced that he is not —as infamous a wretch as his wife."

"*Taisez-vous donc!*" whispered de Vieuzac hurriedly.

But his caution came too late. In my anxiety to bring conviction home to the mind of my interlocutor, I had not noticed the entrance of a third person, and now, when I looked round and saw Bracknell standing close to my elbow, I perceived that the cat was out of the bag.

"You don't mince matters, Maynard," Bracknell observed. "After that very frank expression of opinion, I dare say you won't object to my asking what you are talking about."

"Our conversation was strictly confidential," broke in de Vieuzac, with some eagerness. "Neither Mr. Maynard nor I have the right to repeat it."

Bracknell glanced at him for a moment, as a big dog glances at a little one, and then turned to me again. "Come," he said, "I am waiting to hear in what respect I am less infamous than my wife."

It seemed best to answer him. "M. de Vieuzac and Beauchamp have fallen out," I replied, "and unfortunately the difference has ended in a challenge, you and I being nominated as Beauchamp's seconds. When you came in, I was trying to point out that, as you are heir-presumptive to Beauchamp's estates, you could not let him risk his life in such a way."

"I should have thought," remarked Bracknell coolly, "that a man from whom one has expectations would have been the man of all others whom one would like to see risking his life."

"I doubt," I replied, "whether you would like it—under the circumstances."

"Oh, the circumstances, eh? And pray, what are they?"

"It is needless to speak of them," cried de Vieuzac, before I could answer. "Mr. Maynard has convinced me that I have been in the wrong, and I shall hasten to offer my excuses to Mr. Beauchamp. I have only to add that if you consider yourself in any way aggrieved by me, my lord, I shall hold myself entirely at your disposition."

"You seem to be spoiling for a fight,"

remarked Bracknell. "I don't know that I have any grievance against you; but I'll do my best to indulge you by discovering one."

The Frenchman bowed, pirouetted round on his heels and left the room.

"Now, Harry," said Bracknell, "perhaps you'll explain yourself. Of course I can guess what those two idiots quarrelled about, but it seems to me that 'infamous wretch' is pretty strong language for a cautious fellow like you to use. Between you and me, what did you mean by it?"

Perhaps I was hardly justified in telling him; but at the moment I really did not see for whose sake I was bound to be reticent. To my mind there was nothing very extraordinary in such a

woman as Hilda wishing to get Beauchamp out of the way and step into his shoes. It has always seemed to me that murderers are only regarded with greater abhorrence and punished more severely than other criminals because we all have such a strong dislike to the idea of being murdered, and that the man who slanders or cheats me is morally just about as culpable as the man who knocks me on the head. Therefore, when I had related the events of the day to Bracknell, I was a good deal astonished at the effect produced upon him by my narrative. He strode up and down the room, muttering furious imprecations and working himself up into such a state of blind rage that I determined not to let him out of my sight until he should have

become calmer. If Lady Bracknell had made her appearance just then, I don't know what catastrophe might not have happened.

But the storm soon spent itself. Presently he came and sat down beside me, saying quietly, "That Frenchman behaved rather well, I think."

"Well, yes," I agreed, "I think he did. He is a gentleman and he will hold his tongue; but I suspect that you won't see him at your house any more."

"Hardly! For the matter of that, I sha'n't have a house much longer. I'm utterly smashed, and I suppose every stick in my possession will be sold up. Her ladyship will be a pleasant sort of companion to face grinding poverty with, won't she? I expect she'll go back to

her father, though. After all that has happened, I don't see that I am bound to go on living with her. Well, what are you making grimaces at? You think it's a case of the pot calling the kettle black, perhaps? I'm black enough, goodness knows! but you yourself said just now that you didn't believe I had sunk to her depth of infamy. I allowed her to have her own way with regard to Beauchamp, which, if you like, was not pretty behaviour; but she represented to me that the young fool was mad about her, that he would never marry Mildred, and that, for poor little Sunning's sake, it would be a thousand pities to let that huge fortune slip between our fingers. She didn't put it quite so coarsely as that; she can express herself in a very

pleasant and convincing sort of way when she chooses, and I dare say I wasn't unwilling to be convinced." Bracknell paused for a moment and sighed. "You remember what I said to you the day my poor little man died," he went on presently. "I haven't been able to endure the sight of her since then, and I haven't cared two straws how she amused herself or what her plots and plans might be. It was all one to me. But I never suspected her of anything so fiendish as compassing a friend's death in order to get hold of his money. No, by Jove! I never suspected her of that. I shall tell Beauchamp about it."

"I think you had better not," I said.

"I shall, though," he returned; "it's

the least I can do. If that doesn't cure him, nothing will; and I owe it to him to do my best to cure him. I shouldn't be surprised if he went off and married Mildred after all."

"It would be a fitting conclusion to this highly creditable business," I could not help remarking. "Shall you urge Lady Mildred to accept him now?"

"No," answered Bracknell shortly, "I am not going to urge anybody to do anything; they may muddle it out among them. As for me, about the best thing I could do would be to put a bullet into my head. I'm sick of all this!"

Thereupon he got up and strode away, leaving me not altogether dissatisfied with my evening's work. "There will at least be no duel now," thought I to

myself. "Hilda's machinations have ended in a complete fiasco; and, unless I am very much mistaken, she is about to pass through the most uncomfortable quarter of an hour of her ill-spent life."

CHAPTER VII.

MURDER, the proverb tells us, will out; and although, of course, we do not know how many murders have remained undiscovered, appearances seem to lend support to the theory. In like manner, I have always observed that anything in the shape of a scandal is sure to become public property, however much it may be to the interest of those concerned in it to keep their own counsel; and a very comforting thought this should be to the numerous persons who love a choice bit

of scandal above everything. That de Vieuzac and Beauchamp had had a mortal quarrel; that they had been within an ace of slitting one another's weasands in the good old-fashioned style; that they had only been pacified by the joint exertions of Lord Bracknell and the reader's humble servant; and that a scene of the most distressing and dramatic nature had taken place subsequently between Lady Bracknell and her incensed husband—these things were known all over the house before I left my bedroom the next morning; and when I made my appearance I found my fellow guests upon the tip-toe of joyous excitement and curiosity. If they gained no further information from me, it was not for want of asking for it; nor, I imagine, would the appeased rivals

have escaped cross-examination, had not those gentlemen wisely sought safety in flight. They must have journeyed up to London by the early express together; and I should much have liked to hear what they conversed about by the way, but had no opportunity of making inquiries as to that until the whole subject had ceased to interest me.

However, that I may not seem to exalt myself unduly by affecting a superiority to the weaknesses of my neighbours, I will confess that I was most anxious to obtain some account of the lecture which Bracknell had doubtless administered to his wife; because I thought it likely that this had been expressed in fine, forcible English, such as one is always glad to listen to in these days of roundabout

phrases and involved construction. My hostess, looking rather hard at me, informed me that the Bracknells were leaving that morning; so that I was obliged to bolt my breakfast in a terrible hurry. For, after all the trouble that I had taken in the matter, I should have been truly vexed had I been denied the satisfaction of seeing her ladyship's face before she departed.

As it fell out, I was privileged not only to see her face but to hear her voice; and I don't know when I have enjoyed anything more than the interview of ten minutes or so which she was pleased to accord to me in the conservatory, where I discovered her. A deeply discomfited woman was she that day, and bitter were the reproaches with which she assailed me.

"This has been your doing from first to last!" she exclaimed. "All the misery and disgrace that may come of it will lie at your door."

And when I replied that I accepted the whole responsibility and gloried in it, she fairly lost her temper—a thing that was not usual with her—declaring that that only showed what an empty-headed, conceited idiot I was. "You think yourself so wise that you must needs have a finger in every one's business. I should very much like to know whom you flatter yourself that you have benefited this time! Not your friend, Jim Leigh, at all events; for, mark my words, Mr. Beauchamp will go straight off and propose to Mildred now. I need not tell you that she will accept him. For all her demure airs, she

knows the value of a large income as well as anybody. As for me, you have certainly done me an ill turn, if that is any satisfaction to you—which I suppose it is. For the last five or six years I have shown you every possible civility ; I have had you to dinner again and again when you bored me to death, and I have introduced you into lots of good houses which you know very well that you would never have entered but for me. Naturally, therefore, you hate me. Why you should hate Bracknell I don't know ; but you have very effectually ruined him. Alfred Beauchamp's marriage means bankruptcy to him—neither more nor less than that."

She must have been very angry to use such candour. "You admit then, dear Lady Bracknell," I observed, "that

your purpose was to improve the family prospects by getting Alfred Beauchamp killed out of the way."

"I admit no such thing," she returned, "and I defy you to produce one atom of proof that I wanted him to fight M. de Vieuzac. I will admit that I flirted with him. If that shocks you, you are welcome to be shocked. It didn't shock Bracknell, who knew quite well what I was doing, and why I did it. That much he couldn't deny last night, in spite of all his raving and storming."

"Did he rave and storm?" I inquired with interest.

"Yes, he did. He said such abominable things to me that I have very great doubts as to whether I can continue to live with him."

"You will wait," I presume," said I, "until you see whether there is a chance of his having anything to live upon."

Why this remark should have exasperated her I cannot tell: possibly because it expressed nothing more than the simple truth. At all events, she turned upon me quite furiously. "You think it is safe to insult me, do you?" she cried. "You will find yourself mistaken. I have a very good memory, and I am not likely to forget what I owe you. The day will come when you will be sorry for having meddled with me."

That day may come; but it has not come yet, and I am still unrepentant. I believe I am one of the very few

people who can boast of having put Lady Bracknell into a passion.

She and her husband drove down to the station together, but, as I understood, parted there, her ladyship making for another country house, to which she had been invited, while Bracknell went up to London. Thither I also betook myself on the following day; and there, shortly afterwards, I received a letter from my mother, in which I was begged to run down and see her.

"I am feeling uneasy about our friends at Staines Court," she wrote, "and should be very glad to have a little talk with you. The young man Beauchamp has arrived. I fear, but am not sure, that he has come for the purpose of renewing his *most unwelcome* attentions."

How this bad behaviour of the young man Beauchamp was to be checked by my advent upon the scene did not appear; but of course I hastened to obey my mother's summons, and on reaching my journey's end, whom should I find waiting for me upon the platform but Jim Leigh. He said he had heard that I was expected by that train, and had thought he would come down and meet me, which was highly flattering.

"I've got the dog-cart here," he added, "so that I can drop you at your house if you like; but don't you think a walk would do you good after being shut up in that stuffy railway-carriage? The cart can take your traps on for you."

It was not exactly pleasant weather for walking, the roads and lanes being deep

in mud, and a gusty wind having been blowing all day from the north-west, with occasional showers of cold rain, which seemed likely to be succeeded by snow; but as it was evident that Jim had a great deal to say to me, I would not baulk him of his purpose.

"You know," he began, as soon as we had set out, "what I told you in London last summer about Lady Mildred."

"Yes," I answered. "If I remember rightly you were disturbed in mind about her matrimonial prospects and your object was to induce Beauchamp to espouse her."

"My dear Harry," returned Jim gravely, "circumstances alter cases. I don't know whether that ever was exactly what you could call my object, but

anyhow it isn't my object now. I thought at that time that she really cared for Beauchamp."

"I perceive," said I, "what the circumstances are which have altered the case, and I heartily congratulate both you and Lady Mildred. There will be a row, of course; but you must try not to mind a row."

Jim sighed deeply, "It isn't so simple as all that, you know," he said. "I believe I have told you already that Mildred is an angel—a positive saint upon earth!"

"I think I remember your mentioning it," I replied. "What then? Is it characteristic of saints and angels to marry men whom they don't love and throw over those to whom they are attached?"

"Why, of course it is," returned Jim, with a shade of impatience. "Given certain conditions, that is precisely what a saint or an angel would do."

"I cannot," I observed, "pretend to your familiarity with the ways of those celestial beings, but to a mere earthly intelligence like mine it does appear——"

"Now Harry," interrupted Jim, "don't go on in that way. It isn't the least bit funny, and it's no help to a fellow. Just allow me to speak for a few minutes and I'll tell you how matters stand."

Having thus ruthlessly snubbed me and reduced me to silence, he proceeded (though, I must say, not very lucidly), to redeem his promise. The upshot of what he had to say was that he had been unable to refrain from avowing his love

to Lady Mildred and that, to his unutterable joy, he had discovered that his love was returned. She had, however, declared most positively that she considered herself bound in honour to carry out her father's wishes, should it be in her power to do so, and I gathered that the only thing which had hitherto kept this luckless pair from breaking their hearts was a comforting conviction that, after all, this would not be in her power. Even Lord Staines—who, in accordance with the intention which he had expressed to me, had remonstrated firmly but kindly with his daughter—had acknowledged that there is no known method of marrying a man who won't ask you to marry him. "And I really believe," added Jim, "that if Beauchamp had distinctly refused

to come forward, he wouldn't have had any serious objection to me."

"In other words, if he can't get £40,000 a year, he will be graciously pleased to put up with a sixth of that sum," I observed.

"Well, it isn't only a question of income; there's the debt that I told you about. However, Beauchamp *has* come forward at last, and I confess to you frankly, Harry, that I'm at my wits' end. I don't see my way at all."

"Has Beauchamp proposed?" I inquired.

"Not yet; but he may do it any day. In fact, it is quite certain that he has come here in order to do it. He wrote to Lady Mildred, offering himself for a week, which he would hardly have done

unless he had meant business. From what he has let fall, I suspect that he has had a quarrel with Lady Bracknell and has decided to cut himself off from her. Old Staines is as pleased as Punch, he looks upon the thing as settled. Harry, what the deuce am I to do?"

"Don't you think," I suggested, "that, under all the circumstances, Lady Mildred might be your best adviser?"

But he shook his head despondently. "She has made up her mind," he answered; "she has no doubt at all as to what her duty is; she is ready to sacrifice herself for the sake of her family. But am I to stand quietly looking on while this sacrifice is carried out? That's the question."

It was not altogether easy to answer

him. The situation was one which has repeated itself often enough in history and legend. Iphigenia got out of her awkward predicament, as we know, in a manner more or less satisfactory to all parties concerned, but where, in this case, were we to look for the *deus ex machinâ* who should fulfil the father's vow and sever the daughter's chains by one happy stroke?

"Obviously," I said at length, "either the family or Lady Mildred must be sacrificed; and, all things considered, I think the family had better go to the wall."

"But she won't consent to that," answered Jim ruefully.

"Exactly so; and therefore I don't see what course is open to you, except to

stand and look on. Have you thought of any alternative plan?"

"None," he replied disconsolately. "I was in hopes that you, who are so much sharper than I am, might be able to suggest something."

I was gratified by the compliment, but conscious of my inability to show myself worthy of it. Certainly I could have devised several excellent schemes, but in order to work them it would have been essential to obtain Lady Mildred's acquiescence. What was to be done, so long as the victim obstinately refused to raise her head from the block? However, not to discourage my unfortunate friend more than was necessary, I promised him that I would think the dilemma over very carefully; and, either because

drowning men will clutch at straws or because he really had a misplaced confidence in my abilites, this assurance seemed to comfort him a good deal.

At my own gate, where we found his dog-cart waiting, he bade me good-bye. "I shall look you up to-morrow afternoon, old chap," said he. "By that time I'll be bound to say you'll have hit upon some idea." In which over-sanguine anticipation he drove away.

And now it was that my dear mother showed the spirited stuff of which she is made. Not a word would she listen to of my sober representations as to the danger of intermeddling with our neighbours' affairs, and when I was shabby enough to quote her against herself, reminding her that these things were

ordered for us and that all was doubtless for the best, though we, with our limited intelligence, might not be able to see it, she became quite angry.

"Another time," said she, "I will show you the folly and wickedness of such talk. For the present, it is enough to say that I will not have my poor Mildred married to a man whom she detests in payment of anybody's debts."

"I don't think she detests him," I answered, "but let that pass. How are you going to prevent her from being handed over to him?"

Thereupon, to my utter amazement, she coolly informed me that she intended to go up to Staines Court and beard the new Agamemnon in his den. As she had not been outside the limits of our

own garden for a matter of twenty years, and as the only conveyance that we possess is a two-wheeled pony-cart, it may be imagined how this proposition took my breath away.

"Lord Staines," she went on, with a smile, "is too feeble to leave the house. The mountain will not come to Mahomet, so Mahomet must go to the mountain. I shall write and ask him to send a carriage for me, and you must hoist me into it somehow."

This proposed borrowing of the enemy's transport in order to reach the battle-field was a stroke of humour which I appreciated, but I could not, of course, sanction it. It was not, however, until I had assured my mother that she should only leave the house over my prostrate

body that she yielded, with a very bad grace, saying: "So be it, then; but please to understand, Henry, that I see my duty plainly marked out for me and that I shall not be deterred from doing it. You must bring this Mr. Beauchamp to call upon me."

When my mother addresses me as "Henry," it means that she is in no mood to be trifled with. Accordingly I walked up to Staines Court the next morning, asked for Beauchamp, told him what a pleasure it was to meet him again (a pleasure in which he did not appear to participate), and mentioned that my mother, who lived hard by, was most anxious to make his acquaintance. He was a polite young man; and, though evidently much surprised by this sudden

development of friendliness on my part, he made no difficulty about returning home with me.

My mother received him in that bright little up stairs sitting-room where so much of her life has been spent, and about which there always clings a faint, old-fashioned smell of *pot-pourri*. She is a very beautiful and refined-looking old lady, and it is my belief that she is perfectly aware of the fact. I noticed that she was wearing a little of the treasured Mechlin lace which belonged to her great-grandmother, and as soon as she opened her lips I perceived that she had put on her very best manner, which, like the lace, is only assumed upon occasions of importance.

She made me place a chair for Beauchamp beside her sofa, and smiled graciously upon him over the top of a large fan, which she swayed gently to and fro while she spoke. "It is very good of you, sir," she began, "to visit a bed-ridden old woman whose conversation can have few attractions for you. Indeed, I should not have ventured to put you to so much inconvenience, had I not had a special motive for doing so."

I suppose Beauchamp had never heard anything like this before in all his days. He was quite unaccustomed to being called "sir" and condescended to, and it evidently flustered him.

"Oh, but really, you know, Mrs. Maynard—upon my word—delighted, I'm

sure!" said he, with all the graceful eloquence of the age.

"You are so kind," resumed my mother suavely, "as to say so, but I must not flatter myself that your presence here is due to any other cause than to the courtesy which, as I have always understood, is natural to you."

She went on in this strain for some little time, gradually working up to her point, and anything funnier in its way than the contrast which she presented to her bewildered interlocutor I have seldom witnessed. At length she shut up her fan with a snap, exclaiming, more in sorrow than in anger:

"And can what I hear be true, Mr. Beauchamp! Can it be that you, a gentleman and a man of honour, are not

only forcing your attentions upon a lady to whom they are distasteful, but that you have actually made her acceptance of your hand the subject of a pecuniary bargain with her father?"

He assured her earnestly that it was not true: she had been misinformed. Nothing would induce him to force his attentions upon anybody who—who—in short, who didn't want them. "And as for a bargain, there really never was any bargain at all—at least, not in the way that you mean — there wasn't indeed! I'm sure I shall be only too happy to oblige you, Mrs. Maynard, if you'll tell me what you wish me to do, and if you won't be—excuse me!—quite so *awfully* polite about it."

Thus adjured, my mother consented

to unbend and make her meaning plain. Without mentioning Jim's name, she gave it to be understood that Lady Mildred's affections were engaged; after which, she discreetly insinuated that although, under such circumstances, Mr. Beauchamp must feel that it would be out of the question to take advantage of her filial submissiveness, yet, in some ways, too abrupt a withdrawal on his part was to be deprecated.

"Lord Staines," said she, "is an old man and in broken health. From what the doctor tells me, I fear that he may not be with us much longer, and we should all wish to spare him, if possible, the shock of a sudden disappointment."

"I see," broke in Beauchamp, with a knowing nod. "After what you've told

me, I wouldn't for the world marry poor little Mildred. In fact, to tell the truth, I never was very keen about it. And we'll manage to humbug the old boy as long as he lives."

My mother drew herself up and looked severe. "You surprise me, Mr. Beauchamp," she said. "Surely you do not suppose that I am advising a course of deception!"

Here I judged it opportune to put in my oar. "Nobody," quoth I, from the background, "could suppose anything so unwarrantable. You will not be called upon to use deception, my dear Beauchamp, only a little diplomacy, a little tact."

"Harry," said my mother, "I am quite ashamed of being so troublesome, but *would* you mind going down stairs and

seeing whether my knitting is in the library? If it is not there, it may perhaps be on one of the chairs in the drawing-room. Or possibly it may have become entangled in Sarah's skirts, as it sometimes does, and been swept down into the kitchen. At any rate, I feel sure that it must be somewhere."

If there is one thing for which I am more remarkable than for my humility I suppose it is my obedience. I was absent for exactly five-and-twenty minutes, and when I came back to say that the knitting was nowhere to be found, I was not at all surprised to find my mother tranquilly occupied with it, nor was there any need to inform me that the two conspirators had arrived at a perfect mutual understanding.

Upon the morality of the compact thus entered into I made no comment at the time, and forbear from making any now; but I will say for my mother that she had the grace to feel thoroughly ashamed of herself, as was shown by the shortness of her manner during the rest of the day and by the vindictive determination with which she insisted upon reading a long sermon to me and the servants that evening after prayers, although it was the middle of the week.

CHAPTER VIII.

If I were asked to mention the man of my acquaintance whom I consider the least fitted, by nature and by habit, to impose upon a child of average acuteness, I should unhesitatingly name Jim Leigh. Yet such is the power of love, and so prone are the best of us to listen to casuistical arguments, that he embarked upon the career of duplicity suggested to him by his friends with a readiness, not to say a zest, of which he ought certainly to have been incapable. That

he and Lady Mildred and Beauchamp were actuated by the best of good motives in behaving as they did I don't deny ; but, as a more or less impartial looker-on, I felt my sympathies veering round, while I watched them, to the side of the unsuspecting old man who was so completely taken in by their manœuvres. Lord Staines, I believe, looked upon his daughter's engagement as being to all intents and purposes an accomplished fact. He saw that she walked or rode every day with her supposed lover; he did not know that as soon as they were out of sight of the house they were joined by Jim, and that Beauchamp then promptly hurried away to smoke a cigar with me, thereby interfering considerably with my daily labours. He seemed to be satisfied

that all would now go well; but in truth the apathy which had fallen upon him after his grandson's death was hardly to be stirred by any event, great or small.

One event, for which he, and indeed all London, must have been fully prepared, took place at this time and created no little excitement in the neighbourhood; for we do not study the "society" journals much in our parts, nor does the gossip of the clubs reach us. I say that the financial collapse of the Bracknell establishment can have surprised no one who had lived in or near the fashionable world during the foregoing year or so; yet, if her statement was to be believed, it fell with all the cruelty of an unexpected blow, upon the person who, one would have thought, should have been best

aware of its imminence. Late one evening, Hilda, bringing with her a stupendous pile of baggage, arrived at Staines Court to cast herself, somewhat dramatically, upon the protection of the head of the house. I happened to be dining there and witnessed her entry upon the scene, which was of a nature to melt the hardest heart. In a voice broken by emotion she told her lamentable tale. She had—so she assured us—no longer a home; perhaps even she had no longer a husband; for to Bracknell's whereabouts she was unable to obtain any clue. On her return to Wilton Place, after paying a round of visits, she had found the minions of the law in possession and her personal property seized. "They have taken everything

—everything!" she cried. "Even my Bible and Prayer-book are in their hands!"

At this an unfeeling member of her small audience had the bad manners to laugh; but she treated his interruption with the contempt that it deserved, and went on to enlarge upon the pitiable plight in which she found herself. She had nothing left but the clothes she stood up in—those and a few others which she had taken with her to the country. Not a word of warning, not a single direction or suggestion had been vouchsafed to her. After being neglected for years, she was finally abandoned! "And now," she concluded, in a tragic tone, "what am I to do?"

"I should think," answered Lord Staines, rather peevishly, "that you had

better go and wash your face and hands and then have some dinner."

The advice was more practical than sympathetic; but such as it was, she acted upon it. She may have had some fear that her father-in-law would recommend her to go straight to the Rectory (which was certainly what I should have done in his place), and no doubt she preferred remaining where she was to seeking that refuge.

Staines Court is a large house; but one of its temporary inmates decided without delay that it was not large enough to contain him and Lady Bracknell at the same time. "I shall be off the first thing to-morrow morning," Beauchamp informed me in confidence, after he had beat a precipitate retreat from the drawing-room,

taking me with him. "Called away on urgent business, don't you know. That woman has brass enough for anything, but I'll be hanged if I can trust myself to speak to her."

Beauchamp, who, as I have already mentioned, had latterly favoured me with a good deal of his company, had in the course of our conversations taken occasion to express his opinion of Lady Bracknell in the most unequivocal terms. There is no iconoclast so ruthless as an ex-devotee; and indeed it must be very unpleasant to discover that a woman whom you have been disposed to worship has not only made a fool of you, but done her best to rob and murder you into the bargain.

So Beauchamp took wing; and whether

Lady Bracknell was annoyed or relieved by his flight I cannot venture to say. She was in some respects so sharp and in others so oddly insensible, that, for aught I know, she may still have flattered herself that she might be able to lure him back into her net. Be that as it may, it was hardly to be expected that her ladyship's humour should be of the best at such a time, and from the assiduity of her attentions to her father-in-law, as well as from the extreme amiability which she displayed towards Lady Mildred, I felt pretty sure that her heart was full of cursing and bitterness. Also, although, upon the whole, she was civil enough to me, she favoured me with a look every now and then, which I understood to mean, "Wait a little longer, my friend.

I haven't forgotten your fussy interference with my schemes, and I mean to be even with you yet."

Now, so far as I myself was concerned, I accepted these silent and smiling threats with a good deal of equanimity, for I really did not see how it was in her power to do me any harm ; but of course it was open to her to inflict vicarious trouble upon me, while at the same time serving Lady Mildred, whom she hated, an ill turn, and the stone which she ultimately picked up, wherewith to slay this brace of birds, was one which lay, so to speak, at her feet. It would have been very unlike her to overlook it ; nor was I at all surprised when Jim sought me out, one day, and informed me with a very long face, that his

machinations had been denounced to Lord Staines.

"It was Lady Bracknell's doing," he said. "It seems that she went to the old man and told him that she could not bear to see him hoodwinked, that she felt it her duty to open his eyes—and all that. So she opened his eyes. But I don't think," added Jim, pensively, looking down at the ground and then glancing quickly up at me for a moment—"I don't think that her sense of duty had much to say to the matter."

"I will venture," I remarked, "to go along with you as far as that; I don't think her sense of duty had much to say to it. But perhaps that is of no great consequence. What has been the result of this timely intervention of hers?"

"Oh," answered Jim, with a slight shrug of his shoulders, "the result has been that I have been turned out of the house. I couldn't expect anything else, could I? What annoys me is to think that I have deserved it. Lord Staines really behaved uncommonly well. He sent for me at once and told me that I had been accused by Lady Bracknell of systematically deceiving both him and Beauchamp. He said he thought I ought to know what she asserted, though he himself didn't believe her, and was sure that neither Mildred nor I would take advantage of Beauchamp's absence in the way she described. Well, of course she hadn't got it quite right; still, when he put it in that way, I had to tell him the truth. I never felt so small in my life,

and I couldn't get him to understand why Beauchamp should have assumed a false character. The end of it was that he sent for Mildred. It was very hard upon her, poor dear; but she came out of it splendidly. I must say that Mildred is——"

"Oh, yes; I know—an angel," I interrupted rather rudely. "I don't doubt it; only, if I were in your place, I think I should prefer her being a woman. Filial affection is all very fine, but it seems to me that, having made up her mind to marry you, she ought to say so."

"But, my dear fellow, that's exactly what she did," returned Jim. "There was no persuading poor old Staines that Beauchamp wasn't in earnest, and he wanted her to promise that she would

give me up. That she refused to do, so then he said he was very sorry, but that, under the circumstances, he must forbid me his house. I couldn't complain of that. I said I was very sorry too, which was true enough. I shouldn't have minded so much if he had flown into a rage; but he was quite quiet all the time, and I'm afraid he was a good deal hurt, poor old chap! Mildred says he is getting fidgety about Bracknell too. They haven't heard a word from him, and the lawyers wrote the other day to say that he had put his affairs into their hands and that he spoke of leaving England. I wonder where he is and what he is going to do!"

Hardly were the words out of his mouth when the door of my study, where

we were sitting, was flung open, and in walked Bracknell himself. He marched straight up to Jim, laid a hand on each of his shoulders, and said: "Well, you dear, solemn old Jim, so you're going to have your own way at last, are you? About time too! I saw Beauchamp in town yesterday, and he told me that it was all right between you and Mildred. I'm heartily glad of it."

It was the voice of the Bracknell of our school days that spoke, and indeed when I looked at him it seemed to me that his eyes, too, had recovered something of their old boyish light. "Give me a cigar, Maynard," said he, seating himself astride upon a chair, "and we'll have a jolly hour together, we three, it's quite on the cards that we may never

spend another hour together; for I'm off to the Soudan to fight those black beggars, who seem able to give a pretty good account of themselves. We haven't always been quite as good friends as we once were, but that has been my fault, and as I'm going away now, perhaps you'll forgive and forget, eh, Jim?"

Jim silently stretched out his big brown hand, which the other took; and then I produced my best cigars and rang for brandy and soda. But Bracknell declined that refreshment.

"No drink, thanks," said he, with a laugh. "I've given up drink and cards and everything else that ought to be given up, and I'm going to be a good boy for the future."

He was in wonderfully high spirits. He told us how he had discharged all his debts of honour (which may have had something to do with his inability to discharge the others); how, by working his interest in high quarters, he had managed to get appointed to some queer corps—whether it was the mounted infantry or the dismounted cavalry or the camel-marines I can't recollect—and how he was looking forward to a noble fight; "which, after all, when you come to think of it, is the very best use that a hulking brute like me can put himself to." But about his wife he said never a word; nor did either Jim or I care to bring forward her name, the former merely mentioning that he had been forbidden to show himself at Staines

Court, without specifying the origin of this decree of banishment.

"Oh, that'll be all right," Bracknell said airily; "the governor will come round if you give him time. Now that the pen has gone through Beauchamp's name, there's nothing but you in the race, that I can see."

But he did not seem disposed to dwell upon the subject, nor indeed upon any other that was connected with the present or the future. It was about old Eton days that he wanted to talk, and very soon Jim and he were chuckling over the memory of many a bygone escapade, as if they had been schoolboys together once more. At last Bracknell glanced at his watch and pitched away the end of his cigar.

"Ah, well!" he said, "it has been very jolly seeing you fellows again; but my time's up now and I must go and say good-bye to the governor and Mildred. I shall have to get back to London this evening, so as to make an early start to-morrow. You might walk up with me, Jim. Oh, no, by the way, you can't though. But come down to the station at five o'clock and see the last of me, like a good chap, will you?"

Jim promised that he would be there, and presently Bracknell took my arm and walked me off towards Staines Court. I accompanied him very willingly, because I was rather curious, I confess, to see what would happen if he encountered Hilda; and, as luck would have it, when we were within a few yards of the house that ill-used

lady, in a neat walking costume, came tripping down the steps.

She nodded to Bracknell, without any manifestation of surprise. "Oh," said she, "you have turned up at last. Have you come down to stay?"

"No," answered Bracknell shortly, "I have come down to say good-bye to my father. I'm leaving for the Soudan to-morrow."

"Really? How spirited of you! When will you be back, do you suppose?"

"I'm sure I don't know; never, perhaps. Don't let me keep you standing in the cold."

Hilda smiled and shrugged her shoulders. "I am not much accustomed to being left out in the cold," she remarked. "Nobody has ever yet

succeeded in treating me in that way, and I doubt whether you will succeed. I shall stay at Staine's Court until you return."

"Shall you?" said Bracknell; "I should think you would find that rather dull work. However, you know best what suits you. Good-bye."

"Good-bye," returned Hilda. "Take care of yourself."

She nodded again as she turned away; and so they parted, without so much as shaking hands.

This short dialogue had the effect of sobering my companion, whose face was grave enough when he rang the bell and asked for Lord Staines. I waited for him in the drawing-room while he went to bid farewell to his father and sister,

and a long time I had to wait before he reappeared, looking a little flushed and agitated.

"Come on," he said hurriedly, "we haven't much more than time to catch the train." And when we were out in the park he drew a long breath. "Well, I'm glad that's over!" he exclaimed. "Poor, dear old boy! I shall never see him again, you know; and, dash it all! I wish I had been a better son to him. Not much use saying that now, eh? But I do wish it all the same."

I made some stupid conventional speech, to which Bracknell replied, "Oh, he's breaking up fast, anybody can see that, and he knows it himself. Besides, it's rather more likely than not that I shall leave my bones in Egypt; and

between you and me, Maynard, I sha'n't much mind if I do. I've been pretty well sick of life for some time past, and if I could make a fresh start— However, I can't make a fresh start; and as for living with my wife again, I'd sooner go into penal servitude. Upon my word, I think she is the most infernally wicked woman I ever came across!—and I've seen a fairish number of women who are commonly called wicked."

It was neither my business nor my inclination to take up the cudgels on Hilda's behalf, but I said, "You won't make her any better by deserting her, will you?"

"Nor any worse," returned Bracknell. "She'll be glad enough to get rid of me, you may be sure, and she won't have much to complain of; for when I come

into the property, if I ever do come into it, she shall have the lion's share of my income. I must pay off Beauchamp too, somehow or other. I say, Maynard, do you believe in Providence? Of course you do, though; you're the sort of respectable fellow who would; and your mother brought you up well. I sometimes think Providence may have taken poor little Sunning away for very good reasons. He wouldn't have had your advantages, you see."

Then he suddenly changed the subject and talked about the Egyptian campaign until we reached the station, where we found Jim waiting for us.

The train dashed in immediately afterwards, so that our leave-taking was a brief

one. I remember that Bracknell's last words were: "Good-bye, old Jim; don't forget me if I get knocked on the head out there."

CHAPTER IX.

I HAD dinner up stairs with my mother that evening. She does not, as a rule, approve of this arrangement, which, she says, gets the servants into slovenly habits; but she will countenance and even encourage it when she is anxious to obtain some information from me, because she knows that I am never so amiable and garrulous as when I am seated before a comfortable fire, with a glass of very fair claret at my elbow, and the digestive process going on satisfactorily.

She wanted, of course, to hear all about Bracknell's visit, and was immensely interested in my account of it—more especially in that speech of his which seemed to imply belief in an overruling Providence. Upon this somewhat shaky foundation she soon built up a theory to the effect that Bracknell was a man of deep, albeit unobtrusive, religious convictions, and, warming with her theme (for indeed there is nothing that she delights in more than in trying to make people out better than they are), had just propounded an amazing, and, as I believe, utterly unorthodox application of the dogma of justification by faith, when our aged factotum came in to say that Mr. Leigh was at the door in his dog-cart, and wished to speak to me.

I ran down stairs, feeling sure that some misfortune had happened, and my fears were confirmed when I stepped out into the windy night, and Jim, stooping down over the gleaming lamps of the dog-cart, said: "I want you to come up to the station with me, Harry, there's been an accident to the express."

He had heard no particulars, only that a collision had occurred down the line and that a great many lives were believed to have been lost. "I couldn't go to sleep, not knowing whether Bracknell was alive or dead," he said. "Besides, he may be badly hurt, and there's nobody with him."

I agreed that anything was better than suspense, and having sent a message to my mother to the effect that I was

going home with Mr. Leigh and might not be back before morning, got into the dog-cart; though I had some doubt as to whether we should be able to proceed to the scene of the catastrophe.

However, when we reached the railway, it seemed that there would be no difficulty on that score. Lord Staines was a great man in our part of the world, and Jim himself enjoys a certain consideration; so that the station-master, on hearing our errand, at once placed an engine at our disposition. It had been a very bad accident, he told us; but he had heard that there was but four killed outright, and didn't see no reason to fear as his lordship was one of them.

I hardly know why both Jim and I should have formed an opposite opinion.

We did not communicate it to each other—indeed we scarcely spoke a word during the half-hour or so that we spent rushing through the darkness in the teeth of the south-easterly gale which had risen since nightfall—but afterwards we compared notes and found that neither of us had had any hope from the first. Perhaps, so far as one of us was concerned, hope would not have been quite the right word to use. A little sooner or a little later death must come to us all; and the future, as poor Bracknell himself had said a few hours before, had had but few bright possibilities to offer him. Yet, when among those four silent, stiffened bodies we recognised the one of which we were in search, I own that my philosophy broke down, and that I

was just as sorry as if there had been no mitigating circumstances connected with this swift blotting out of a life which was still young and vigorous. One thinks of the mitigating circumstances afterwards: at the time, a sudden death always seems something strange and horrible, like a murder; although probably most of us, if we could choose, would rather be killed at a blow than die by inches.

Jim took the loss of his friend terribly to heart. He had always loved the man, always admired him and wanted to believe in him, even when faith must have been a little difficult, and it was long before he recovered from the shock of that fatal night. To the present day he cannot bear any allusion to it; nor, I must

confess, is it a subject upon which I myself care to dwell. Our first duty, of course, was to break the news at Staines Court; and how we accomplished this I can scarcely remember. The one thing that stands out clearly in my recollection is Hilda's look of horror when she was told in what manner her husband had met his death.

"I can't see him!" she cried. "Are they bringing him here? I won't look at anything shocking!"

It seemed to me amazing that at such a moment the woman's first thought should have been to spare herself; but perhaps, after all, it would have been more amazing if her first thought had been anything else.

Lord Staines was in bed when we

reached the house. It was thought best that I should at once tell him what could not long be concealed, and he listened to me with very little apparent emotion. He asked me whether I thought Bracknell's death had been a painful one; and when I replied—as, happily, I was able to do—that it must have been instantaneous, he muttered, "Well, well!" and lay back on his pillows, looking straight before him with sunken, weary eyes.

"So there is an end and a finish of us," he said presently; "maybe it's best so. It seems odd that Bracknell and Sunning should both go before me; but I don't suppose I shall have much longer to wait now. When my poor boy and I parted this afternoon, we knew that it

was for the last time, and I'm glad he came to see me—I'm very glad he came to see me. He was in great glee at the prospect of a fight—he has always been like that from a boy. We Henleys may have our faults, but I don't think we have ever been accused of wanting pluck. Bracknell will make himself heard of out there, you'll see. I was a little vexed with him at first for going off and leaving me, but he gave me reasons, and I believe he was right. I wish he didn't hate writing letters so much! The newspapers will tell us all about him, though."

In this way the old man wandered on, until Lady Mildred came softly into the room and made me a sign to leave him. I doubt whether he ever fully realised what Bracknell's fate had been. During

the next few days he talked a great deal about his son, sometimes speaking of him as still alive, sometimes as having been killed in Egypt; but he did not seem able to fix his mind upon any subject for more than a few minutes at a time and often failed to recognise those about him. One duty, fortunately, recurred to his memory, and his performance of it was, I believe, an immense comfort to two simple-minded and conscientious people.

"My poor boy," he said, when he had caused Jim Leigh to be summoned and had made him take Lady Mildred's hand, "told me that I might consent to your marriage without loss of honour. I had thought differently, but Bracknell assured me that some one—the other man——"

"Mr. Beauchamp?" suggested Lady Mildred gently, when her father came to a long pause.

"Beauchamp, yes — Beauchamp, it seems, withdraws. There is money owing to Beauchamp, and I can't attend to business now; but you will see that he is repaid. Bracknell explained it all to me, but I have forgotten. He promised that the money should be paid, though."

"It shall be paid, papa," said Lady Mildred.

"Thank you, my dear. You have been a good daughter and you will be a good wife. I wish you all happiness."

These were the last intelligible words that he said. He lingered on for some days after this, but soon sank into a state

of semi-consciousness, in which at last he passed quietly away. My mother says that he did his duty according to his lights and will be judged by that standard ; and perhaps it may be allowed that in this instance she does not push charity beyond all reasonable limits.

His titles died with him, except that of the barony of Bracknell, which is of ancient creation and which has passed to his daughter. By her also have been inherited his estates, which, although still heavily encumbered, will doubtless recover themselves in time under their present judicious management.

Jim's marriage was a very quiet affair, the bride being in deep mourning at the time for her father and brother ; but Lady Petworth, who came down to take

charge of the orphan after Lord Staines's death, considered it undesirable that the ceremony should be too long postponed; so good Mr. Turner tied the knot, and the young couple have been living at Elmhurst ever since in a seclusion which I dare say is agreeable to both of them, but of which the county does not altogether approve. Jim tells me that the debt of honour bequeathed to his wife has already been paid off, and that he hopes in the course of a few years to be able to move to Staines Court, which is at present shut up. In the meantime he is very well satisfied with his own less pretentious abode; and indeed, if a man were to be condemned to live in the country from year's end to year's end, I don't know that he could find any

pleasanter place to live in than Elmhurst, while I am persuaded that he would search in vain for a fellow-exile more amiable and charming than Lady Bracknell.

The other Lady Bracknell—the viscountess of that name—has quite recently decided to put an end to all confusion of identity between her sister-in-law and herself by changing her condition. During the first few months of her widowhood she resided with her father—a touching spectacle to the neighbourhood, as she drove about, with lowered eyelids, in her weeds. Whether after a time she became bored with the respectful sympathy of the neighbourhood, or whether she found herself better off than she had anticipated, I do not know; but she moved somewhat

suddenly to London, set up house there, discarded crape in favour of pale grey, and began to dispense a hospitality of which many people were found ready to avail themselves. Rumour has it that, on recovering her freedom, she made a desperate bid for the Beauchamp property, and that the fortunate owner thereof met her advances by requesting her in so many words to omit him from the list of her acquaintances; but I do not believe this story. Hilda has experience enough to be aware that flirting with a married woman and espousing her after she has become a widow are two very different things, and it is not likely that so clear-sighted an observer would have wasted time and energy upon a forlorn hope. As a matter of fact, she

has done far better for herself than she would have done by marrying Beauchamp; for she is about to be led to the altar by the eldest son of a duke, and I hear that the bridegroom's relatives have received her with marked cordiality. Her career, so far as it has gone, may serve as a warning to impulsive young men and as an encouragement to the daughters of the clergy.

THE END.

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